The Shinzahou Chronicles Vol 2: Seiryuu no Teki

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VraieEsprit

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Summary

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Description

The race is on to find Seiryuu's Shinzahou, and so the team head North. They stumble on the home of Amiboshi, but can Hikari convince the ghostly Suboshi to let the treasure go? Meanwhile a dark force has joined Seiryuu's team, willing to stoop to new depths in order to bring about the Emperor's aims. Hyoushin faces shadows of his past and Hikari vanishes in a flash of red light...

Chapter 1

The Shinzahou Chronicles
Introduction and Disclaimer

"Mamoritai hito ga ireba chizu wa iranai."
(You don't need a map if there's someone you want to protect)
Chichiri: Aoi Jiyuu, Shiroi Nozomi

Well, congratulations to anyone who's got so far as this. You deserve a cookie :) Or maybe even two — I guess it depends if it's Nuriko doing the cooking…

Being that it's set in the future of Eikouden, this story has a lot of OC potential. This has never been an issue for me writing — I've written future-set fics before and introduced OCs as and when they're necessary without anyone setting fire to me about any of them. However I know for readers it can be a mixed blessing. So there is something of a balance between old and new in this sequence. Boushin, Hikari, Tasuki, Chichiri, Anzu, Kouji, Aidou are all originals. Shishi, Jin, Hyoushin, Aoiketsu, Kintsusei, Kikei — all OCs. But as I've said before, I think I'm usually too cruel to my characters to marysue them. I guess we'll find out as time goes on.

This story is what you might term the "Seiryuu" story, except that it's not going to take place, much, in Kutou. There's good reason for that — I don't want Hikari going to the East just at the moment ;) So instead, Seiryuu no Shinzahou is in the north — in Hokkan. And this is my second reason for writing it this way — at long last, I have a reason to include Amiboshi and Suboshi in something I write! It's an interesting premise, the twins' existances and whether Suboshi would have ever really left his brother's side after his death. I also wanted to give Amiboshi a semblance of family, as I have with Tasuki and Chichiri (whose families are very diversely different from one another, but still strong units).

Amiboshi's wife is Shin Touka. I've not read Ryuusei Den all the way through yet, but I did cheat and read the end. I know this girl Touka is a friend of Amiboshi and Suboshi's, and that she's particularly fond of Amiboshi. Since her role in the novel seems to end with her swearing to live and wishing for him to live so they can meet again… I thought I'd grant that wish. And since Amiboshi is the only surviving Seishi for Seiryuu, it seems logical for him to have it — after

all, the Seiryuu Seishi, if any were reborn, would indeed be as young probably as the Suzaku children and that's not good at all. So yes. Seiryuu no Shinzahou is located in the northern lands. The question is… who will reach it first?

Someone asked me if Aoiketsu *was* a reborn Seiryuu Seishi. No. :) LOL :) I thought I'd made that clear — he's too old to be any of them reborn. Time to guess again!

This part is called "*Seiryuu no Teki*." Translated it means either 'Seiryuu's Enemy' or "Enemy of Seiryuu". I like the ambiguity — is it that Hikari and company are setting themselves up to be Seiryuu's enemies by going after the Shinzahou? Or is it an enemy representing Seiryuu who's now striking at Hikari and companions? Take your pick… I really don't mind…

With all that said, legal blah blah applies as ever, and FY belongs to Watase Yuu :) All non-FY characters created by me (ie, Aoiketsu, Hyoushin, Miramu, etc) are my copyright by basic definition although they connect into the world of Watase Yuu's creation. Even so, they're still not to be duplicated without permission elsewhere.

The Meihi tribe, their language and appearance are entirely of my creation also, and ditto goes for them in terms of fan-fiction re-production.

第二巻：青龍の敵
Volume Two: Seiryuu No Teki

"The Shinzahou is in the hands of two Seiryuu Seishi, both before and beyond the grave."

With the advice of Taiitsukun still ringing in their ears, Hikari, along with her Seishi guardians are all ready to make for the North Country, in search of Seiryuu no Miko's blessed Shinzahou — the teardrop earring from the summoning ceremony. However, nothing is as simple as it seems, and when the travel party is gate-crashed by Tasuki's impetuous daughter Shishi and her friend Jin, Hikari is sure that things couldn't get any worse.

As they reach the snowy borderlands, she seems to have been proven right, as an argument causes her to fall into the hands of the very people they seek — the guardians of Seiryuu'sShinzahou. And it's not long before Hikari realises that Suboshi really doesn't plan on letting death get in the way of revenge against the Suzaku Warriors he hated so badly so many years before!

Meanwhile, Kintsusei of Kutou has sent his Meihi bodyguard with a party of soldiers into the snowy mountains looking for clues as to the

whereabouts of Yui-sama's treasure. With the garbled advice of the spirit of the flame to follow, the Emperor is becoming desperate, especially when he realises Suzaku's men also have an interest in the treasure's whereabouts. On the advice of the opportunistic KikeiKintsusei is persuaded to send another agent into the battle — an assassin from the West who seems keen to face the challenge of Suzaku'sShichi Seishi.

And there is very little he won't stoop to in order to succeed…

Prologue

Hokkan
Makan-mura

"That's everything, Papa. And I tied it really tight, so it won't come loose again."

The small boy heaved the last of the bales onto the pile, turning to send his companion a triumphant smile. His small features were smudged with sweat and dirt from his labours, his simple, farm attire similarly decorated, but the man laughed, resting a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder as he nodded his head.

"You're learning fast." He murmured. "Run inside now, all right? Tell your mother that it won't be much longer, and that if she wants to begin the evening meal, it would be a good time to do so. I have to go check on the animals before I come in — it's going to be another cold night and I want to be sure the barn is secured properly."

"Yes, Papa." The boy nodded his head, offering another wide grin, then turning to hurry towards the house, finding new energy at the thought of a hot meal, and his father watched him go, a low chuckle escaping his throat as he remembered the day's excursions. Tending the fields with his eldest child generally meant everything took twice as long and yet, with the enthusiasm and determination in the young boy's eyes, the man knew he didn't have the heart to tell him so.

"After all, one day this farm will be yours to run and work, and it's hard work, so it's good to be keen." He reflected. "In the meantime…"

He cast a brief, cursitory glance around at his surroundings, satisfied that everything was in its proper place, and he left the storehouse, fastening the chain on the door securely as he crossed the chilled earth towards the small barn which, at night, housed the few sheep the farm kept. Because of the harsh climate, keeping livestock had never been easy, but with the demand for wool and meat, he had persevered, and at length his efforts had borne fruit.

The animals had made their way inside of their own accord,

bleating and complaining about the weather as they nudged and pushed up against one another, and the man hummed a faint melody under his breath as he moved from stall to stall, ensuring that there was enough clean straw for them to be safe and comfortable during the cold night.

As he prepared to leave the animals to their own devices, something caught his gaze from the final outbuilding the farm boasted and he frowned, biting his lip as he registered what the flickering, glowing flares of energy meant. Casting a worried glance back towards the house, although in his heart he knew that it was unlikely any of his growing family would pay any attention to strange lights when there was food to be got on the table and a fire to stoke for the evening ahead, he hurried across the land, fastening the gate behind him almost automatically as he felt something flicker inside of his heart.

“Shunkaku?” He murmured, but there was no response, and as he pushed against the door of the third building, he found it was still locked fast. Fumbling at his belt for the right key, he slid it into the lock, pushing back the door and stepping inside as he realised that his instinct had been right — and that the azure light he had observed had indeed been coming from the far wall of this ancient, stone building.

The man frowned, shaking his head as he crossed the cold hard floor, reaching a tentative hand out towards the back wall as he ran his fingers over a slight, almost invisible gap in the stone. When he had first come to live on this farm, the man he had come to call Father had used this building a lot for storage and other farm tasks, but since the man’s death, it had been used but little. Even the children kept away from it, and the man knew that he was the only one who ever still came here.

He pushed hard against the stone, watching as it slid back to reveal a small compartment. His father had kept the takings from market in this small, safe place, but now there was no money inside… only something which, to the farmer, was both infinitely more precious and less welcome on his farm. Atop a layer of soft, fire-charred blue fabric, as if cushioned in its resting place lay a small, black box. And it was from within this box that something had begun to hum and glitter with strange blue light.

“The Shinzahou.” He murmured, picking up the box and pushing open the lid as he gazed down at the single teardrop earring that lay inside. “Yui-sama… but in all the time it’s been here, hidden on my

farm — why does it glimmer so now? Since it came to me… since Shunkaku and I… I don't understand. Does it mean danger? Is something wrong, or is it the opposite? As if it isn't hard enough, concealing this from my family. If Touka knew… if she realised that I hadn't completely forsaken my Seiryuu routes, she'd be upset. And I don't want that… she never wanted me to follow Seiryuu in the first place. If she knew the treasure was here… but…"

He brushed his fingers against the earring's glistening teardrop, and as he did so, he felt a prickle of energy dance across his skin as the talisman's light faded and died into nothing at all. For a moment he gazed at it, as if trying to interpret what it had meant. Then he sighed, pushing the lid firmly back on the casket as he replaced the treasure back in its hiding place. As an afterthought, he re-adjusted the fabric that it rested on, flickers of memory flaring in his heart as he touched the soft-woven Eastern fabric. Charred and torn as it was, it was the only physical tie he still had to his old life, and as he touched the clothes that he had arrived in Hokkan wearing, a sad smile touched his lips.

"Shunkaku, are you here?" He murmured. "Yui-sama's earring is calling to us… does this mean that we're being needed by Seiryuu once again?"

There was no answer, but a breeze flickered around the inside of the barn, teasing at the man's long queue of sandy hair and he nodded.

"I suppose some destinies can't be avoided forever." He said resignedly. "Whatever force chose for us to be the ones to have this… I suppose… there's nothing else we can do, is there, little brother?"

Carefully he closed the partition once more, pausing for a moment to just stare at the hiding place thoughtfully.

"Papa? Papa, where are you? Mother wants you to gather wood for the fire!" A voice from outside startled him from his reverie, and he turned, moving towards the doorway as he stepped back out into the darkening farmland. His son stared at him, confusion in his gaze, and he offered the boy a smile.

"I was just making sure everything was properly locked." He said softly. "Firewood? Are you going to help me?"

"Mother says I'm not allowed to touch the axe." The boy looked sad. "But I can help you carry it, can't I? Can I, Papa? Then I'll be helping!"

“Of course.” The farmer ruffled the child’s hair affectionately. “Then let’s go, shall we? We mustn’t let the fire go out — I think it’s going to be another cold night.”

“Do you think it’ll snow, Papa?”

“Maybe. Over the mountains, almost certainly.” The farmer nodded his head. “But perhaps here too. So lets take plenty back with us, okay? And then, this evening, we can all sit around it and I’ll play my flute for you. All right?”

“All right.” The boy’s eyes lit up and he grinned, nodding his head. “I’m with you, Papa. With two of us, we’ll get lots of wood and our fire will never go out!”

As they made their way to the back of the estate, where a largeish pile of logs were stacked up waiting to be cut for firewood, the farmer felt a flicker of breeze against his cheek once again, and he pursed his lips, resisting the urge to turn around. He didn’t have to look, after all, to know that another’s eyes were on him, and that his brother had heard his words.

“*Whatever it takes to protect Yui-sama’s treasure, Koutaku-nii*” The voice seemed to echo out of nothing, but the farmer knew it was only a whisper teasing through his thoughts. “*Our duty is to protect it… whatever it takes.*”

Chapter 2

Chapter One

"So, run this all by me again."

The bandit Kashira folded his arms, his bronze gaze flicking between Chichiri and the young, confused schoolgirl as he slowly digested what they had been saying. Deep within the bowels of the bandits' Reikaku-zan lair, to Hikari it seemed that she was a mile away from the odd, ethereal mountain-top and she sank back against the wall with a sigh, wrapping her arms around her knees as she struggled to arrange her long, heavy skirt in such a way that it wouldn't irritate her.

"You're sayin' that somewhere buried in this mountain is what, a bit of Suzaku or something? And that all of this stuff to do with your mark and mine, Chichiri, is because this brat Shishi picked up in the valley is actually Miaka's Shinzahou?"

"That's about the size of it, yes." Chichiri nodded his head, casting Hikari a smile at this juncture, and she returned it with a faint one of her own. "I'm pretty sure she was called here by Suzaku, you know. Taiitsukun seems to think it's likely, too. And that we can't just sit around here and do nothing, Tasuki. This world that Hikari saw when she first came here…"

"Yeah, an' that's another thing." The aforementioned Tasuki rubbed his chin, fang-tipped teeth glittering over his lip as he nodded his head. "This vision o' hers — or whatever it was. Kounan's destruction… right? What caused that, exactly? I thought we saved Kounan already! Is it because of this guy in the East, dabblin' in things that none of us understand? I get that you want us to up sticks an' go to Hokkan to see Amiboshi an' get the Seiryuu Shinzahou… but then what? Are we goin' to fight another war with Kutou over that stupid dragon of theirs or what?"

"Let's hope war doesn't factor into the equation." Chichiri said grimly. "So long as we prevent the Emperor of Kutou from aligning all four Shinzahou, I think we have a good chance of preventing whatever it was Hikari saw. But there's another thing — Hikari's powers are dormant. She's never had to use them, and aside from being drawn here, she's not been able to do anything like what a Shinzahou should be capable of. Which is why we can't disturb

Suzaku's relic for the time being. And it also means something else — that she's potentially in danger. While she can't protect herself, Tasuki, you and I have the task of doing it for her. I'm sure her coming here is meant to help save all four of our lands, but now all of the Shinzahou are in this world, the opposite can also happen. So we need to definitely make sure it doesn't, all right?"

Hikari paled slightly at this, and the wolfish bandit shot her a keen-eyed glance.

"You scared, kid?" He asked softly. Hikari bit her lip, then slowly, she nodded.

"Some." She agreed. "But you would be too if you turned up in a world full of nothing but dead people."

"You ain't got any reason to be." Tasuki told her frankly, and for the first time since the two had met, Hikari saw a flicker of something else in the bandit's expression, something that hinted at the kind heart beyond the lupine exterior. "Chichiri an' me, we're pretty hot on protecting things. We did all right by your ma, an' I wouldn't let Taka or Miaka call either of us to heel for neglectin' our duties. If you're here, and you're the Shinzahou, sure… we'll protect you — but shit, I'd do it anyway, seein' as you're *their* brat. After all, ain't much else I can do for Tama or Miaka now. Like as not I'll never see either of them again an' I'm resigned to that fact now. But you got my word on it, Hikari… Chichiri an' I, we'll do whatever it takes to keep you safe while you're in Kounan… or wherever else, for that matter."

"Really?" Hikari eyed him in surprise. "I mean… *really*?"

"Your old man was a pretty good buddy of mine, once upon a time." Tasuki looked rueful. "An' your ma… well, she was the first girl I didn't hate, an' that's sayin' a lot. Of course, you little idiot. I said so, didn't I? Chichiri an' me, we'll see you safe."

"But we *do* have to go North, and Hikari *will* have to come with us." Chichiri reflected. "I know you can leave this place to Kouji and Anzu, Tasuki… I haven't broached the subject with Aidou yet, though I know what kind of a reception it will probably get. Still, there's nothing else to be done, you know. And I think maybe she'll understand, when I tell her it's to prevent what Hikari saw from coming true. Hikari… Hikari saw my children, Tasuki. My wife and my children, in this dead world. And she gave Aidou — and me — her word to try and help us stop it, in any way she could."

"She did, huh?" Tasuki eyed her anew, and Hikari felt a faint glimmer of pride inside of her as she registered the approving look in

the bronze eyes. “Well. Jus’ like Miaka, an’ all. If I’d had any remaining doubts, Chichiri…”

“There’s no doubt, you know.” Chichiri shook his head. “Taiitsukun confirmed it. And she was able to come with me, to Taikyoku-zan… she’s not a Seishi, nor a Miko. But she’s still connected to the heavens. She probably has more spiritual power than I have, if she’s able to shift between time streams like she has.”

“But right now she can’t switch it on, right?” Tasuki reflected. “Still, I suppose that’s not surprising. Miaka’s world is a weird place, after all. Noone probably taught her how to, an’ Taka’s not much use since he made the cross-over. He ain’t the same Seishi he was when he was Tamahome — he’s built differently, an’ his power ain’t inside o’ him the way it used to be. So I guess noone bothered to tell Hikari here how to be useful… yeesh, what we have to do as babysitters, huh?”

He offered a wry smile, and despite herself, Hikari found she was returning it.

“Do I really have… some kind of power?” She asked. Chichiri nodded.

“Beyond all doubt.” He agreed. “You are the Shinzahou… it’s beyond question, you know. We just have to find a way to help bring it out — but right now, there’s no hurry. We have other things we need to do… we need to head towards the northern border. I’m still thinking about what Taiitsukun said — it’s better we’re as prepared as we can be, because Hokkan’s a cold place at the best of times and if she was right — about the Shinzahou’s guardians… I don’t know what kind of a threat Suboshi might be.”

“He’s dead. He won’t bother us.” Tasuki shook his head, but Chichiri’s expression remained troubled.

“We know from our own experiences that spirits can still be strong and determined fighters.” He said gravely. “And Suboshi had a lot of grievances stored up inside of him. If he knew who Hikari was… considering his animosity for Tamahome and Miaka both…”

He trailed off, and again Hikari felt a chill at the implications in his words.

“I really don’t want to meet this guy.” She admitted. “Are you *sure* I need to come with you?”

“We can’t very well leave you here unprotected.” Chichiri reminded her.

“But if he’s that scary and dangerous… I can’t fight a real person, let alone a ghost.” Hikari objected. “I can’t even get over the vaulting horse in gym class. What do you expect me to do if he attacks me?”

“Get your head down an’ leave it to us.” Tasuki said grimly, his hand brushing against the tip of his metal fan as he did so. “But we ain’t gonna let you meet him, if there’s another option. Don’t worry about it, kid. Chichiri and me, we’ve had dealings with Shinzahou, ghosts and demons an’ survived them. And we’ve faced Suboshi before, too. We’ll deal with it. You’ll be fine.”

“Then all that’s left to do is speak to Aidou.” Chichiri said heavily. “And Kouji and Anzu, of course, too.”

“I know which I’d rather negotiate.” Tasuki smirked, and Chichiri looked rueful.

“Yes…” He reflected. “Oh well. This time, at least, I think she will understand. At least, considering our last conversation — I really hope she will. That this time it’s for her and the children as much as anything — I think she might be willing to let it go. She might even prepare food for our journey, you know.”

“Tell her to do that.” Tasuki nodded. “We’ll need it, if we’re goin’ snow-walkin’.”

“Is it really so cold in the North?” Hikari looked surprised. “It’s so warm here, I suppose I thought…”

“Hokkan’s mountains are always covered in snow, and the land is harsh.” Chichiri nodded. “But the area we’re going to — if my memory serves me correctly — is probably closer to the Western border with Sairou than it is in the real North. It will still be cold, you know — but not as bad as if we were to go right to the uppermost tip.”

“Sairou?” Tasuki looked blank. “Why there?”

“Because the last time we saw Amiboshi was on our trip between the two.” Chichiri reflected. “And Suboshi took him somewhere… somewhere nearby. Miaka said he was staying in a village — and it must have been near the Hokkan/Sairou border. So that’s where, I think, we’ll begin. It’s the best clue we have to go on, anyway.”

“I suppose it is.” Tasuki reflected. “All right. Then I’ll go grab Anzu an’ Kouji an’ explain. And also tell them to keep the cub in harness till we’re gone — just in case. She has some hair-brained idea that the next Suzaku mission I go on, she’s comin’ too — an’ you can imagine how well that went down with Anzu, when it was mentioned.”

“If by cub you mean Shishi, it’s probably already too late to keep it a secret, you know.” Chichiri said casually, eying his friend in wry amusement.

“What do you mean?” Tasuki looked startled, and Chichiri grinned. He raised his hand, spreading his fingers as the door of the chamber swung back, revealing a small, red-haired figure who tumbled forward at the sudden and unexpected loss of her support.

“Shishi!” Tasuki’s eyes widened, and Chichiri spread his hands.

“Told you, you know.” He said evenly.

Shishi scrambled to her feet, a defiant look in her eye as she dusted herself down.

“You were going to go without me!” She said accusingly.

“*You* were listenin’ to stuff that doesn’t concern you.” Tasuki responded. “What are you playin’ at, you little ape? Do you really think I’m going to take you somewhere an’ get you killed?”

“I’m not going to get killed.” Shishi folded her arms. “But I want to come with you and Chichiri. If that brat can come, why can’t I? I can at least use a sword — *she* can’t even walk without falling over.”

Indignation rose inside Hikari at this, and she stood, putting her hands on her hips.

“You try walking straight when your legs are wrapped up in something as heavy as this!” She exclaimed. “You try wearing it and see how much luck you have!”

“Besides, Shishi-chan, if you were listening, you’ll know why Hikari has to come with us to Hokkan.” Chichiri added softly. “This is Suzaku’s work. Hikari is a servant of Suzaku, just like your father and I. She is also our responsibility… this has nothing to do with you.”

“Father?” Hikari blinked, then, “Wait a minute — Genrou… Tasuki is your… dad?”

“You can’t be that stupid… hadn’t you noticed that already?” Shishi was scornful. “It’s not like we don’t look alike. And so what if he is? It’s none of your business either way.”

“But you call him Kashira!”

“Of course I do. It’s who he is, an’ I ain’t the kind of girl who gets favours because my Dad happens to be in charge, *or* because he’s one of Suzaku’s chosen, unlike *some* people!” Shishi said indignantly. “Kashira is Kashira. Papa or not. That’s how it works, although you’re

too weird to understand anything about it. And I don't care if you are some kind of holy treasure, or if your father was Tamahome! It doesn't make you any better than me — even if the Miko *was* your mother, you still look like a stupid kid to me!"

"Shishi, shut your trap." Tasuki said bluntly. "You ain't coming. Hikari is. It's decided. You have other things t'be doin', so go do them."

"I am too coming with you." Shishi said darkly. "If you go without me I'll just sneak out and follow you anyway, you know — or did you forget that when I was little you showed me all the ways in and out of the mountain, just in case there was an attack and I needed to get to safety? You can't keep me here and even Okaasan doesn't know all the passages I do. Besides, you're breaking your word. You more or less said I could come before, so why are you backtracking now? Is it because of *her*,"

She jabbed a finger in Hikari's direction.

"Or are you jus' scared of what Okaasan will say, huh? I want to come with you — what's so wrong about that? I'm almost fifteen, dammit — I'm not a little kid and I'll never be a proper bandit if you don't let me outta the mountain!"

"Chichiri, tell me why it is Meikyo never yells at you like that?" Tasuki sent his comrade a helpless look, and amusement glittered in Chichiri's ruby eye.

"Meikyo's eight years old, you know." He said simply. "Shishi's almost an adult. She wants to spread her wings a little, that's all. But Shishi-chan, it is dangerous, doing Suzaku's work. If there was another way than to take Hikari, I'd leave her behind — but it isn't safe or fair to expect people here to look after her when Tasuki and I are the only ones who really can. You'll make your mother worry, and it won't be as much fun as you think, I'm sure. Remember that your father and I lost friends fighting for the God's cause."

"I know." Shishi seemed to calm some at this, raising serious bronze eyes to her uncle's, and a surprised jolt ran through Hikari's body as she registered the almost instantaneous change in demeanour between the petulant, angry fourteen year old and the young adult warrior. "But Chichiri — maybe I shouldn't've been listening, but I did, an' I heard what you said. About Meikyo an' Eiju an' Aunt Aidou. And they're *my* family, too. So if you an' Papa can protect them, well, so can I. I'm serious about it, too. Eiju wants to be a fighter but he's still a kid — more of a kid than I am, and he ain't grown up with Aniue

and Kashira an' everyone teachin' him how to survive in the mountains. And Meikyo… Mei-chan's still tiny. I ain't gonna sit here in Reikaku-zan knowin' something horrible might come to eat them up. I want to help — this is my fight too. So I'm coming with you. No matter what… I am."

"Shishi…" Tasuki faltered, and the young bandit turned pleading eyes on her father.

"Jin said he'd come with me, if you agreed." She added. "Because I figured if he came too, you'd know I'd be all right. Jin's strong, and he fights good, an' he's the only one better than me with a sword. And maybe we can help… you never know. You and Chichiri, you're not so young any more, you know."

"Cheeky whelp." At this Tasuki laughed, brushing his hand playfully against the back of her head. "How old do ya think ancient is, anyway? I'm no more'n thirty five an' I'll tell you when Chichiri an' I were fighting for Miaka, we met Byakko Seishi in their nineties who still packed one hell of a fightin' punch. You pipe down about age already… we're far from past it, believe you me."

"You know what I mean." Shishi was unperturbed. "So is it all right? Jin and I, we'll come too?"

"Your Ma'll have kittens." Tasuki shook his head slowly, and Chichiri grinned.

"Kittens like Shishi, no doubt." He reflected. "Tasuki-kun, you shouldn't be surprised. Shishi's your daughter. She's taking after her father, that's all. She's just as stubborn, impulsive and bull-headed as you were when we first met."

"What's that mean?" Tasuki looked startled, and Shishi nodded triumphantly.

"There you are! I'm like you." She said firmly. "So in that case, you must understand why I want to go too, mustn't you? Please, Papa. Okaasan will agree, if *you* tell her it's okay with you. And Jin will come too. You know you can trust him, don't you? And he's stronger than most of the others."

Tasuki sighed, casting Chichiri a glance, and the other man shrugged.

"It's not up to me." He said evenly. "She's your wolf cub, Tasuki."

"Lion cub." Shishi corrected. "Papa's a wolf. I'm a lion."

"You're a goddamn pain in the ass, too." Tasuki muttered. "Fine. If

Jin comes too, then… then all right. But listen. If it gets dangerous, you an' he get outta the line of fire, you understand? An' you can do your share of helpin' Hikari, too… believe me, it won't be any picnic for any of us — you are not goin' near any Seiryuu Celestial Warriors, I want that understood now. All right?"

"Alright." Shishi nodded solemnly, though excitement sparkled in her bronze eyes. "Are we leaving right away, or…?"

"Not right away. I have to speak to your Ma and to Kouji and explain everythin', and Chichiri the same to his family." Tasuki shook his head. "But you can do somethin' to make yourself useful in the meantime. Take Hikari an' find her somethin' better to wear… somethin' she can travel in, because she doesn't seem to take well to bein' dressed in Aidou's fussy skirts."

"That was only because we were going to see Boushin, you know." Chichiri said mildly. "And we wanted her to make a good impression. But you're right — she needs something she can travel in more easily. Her own clothes were completely destroyed?"

"Burnt an' fallin' apart when she got here." Tasuki confirmed. "Well, Shishi? You heard what I said. Take Hikari an' do as I tell you."

"But…" Shishi cast Hikari a doubtful glance, then, "You won't skip off without me, if I do?"

"Idiot, of course not. We're taking Hikari too, remember?"

"Promise?"

"Kashira's word."

"All right then." Shishi sighed heavily, but nodded her head. "Hikari, you better come with me."

"Do I really *have* to?" Hikari sent Chichiri a glance. "I'd rather come with you… Aidou-san is at least nice to me."

"Oh, stop whining and get up already." Shishi snapped, grabbing her roughly around the wrists and hauling her to her feet. "You might think you're special, but I'm no happier about this than you are. Kashira's orders are Kashira's orders, so deal with it and come with me."

Hikari sent Chichiri an emploring glance, but the Seishi spread his hands.

"Better you're with Shishi than with Aidou when she finds out where we're going." He said lightly. "Trust me, Hikari-chan — and let

Shishi do as she's told. Besides, if you're going to travel together, you should at least get to know each other a little — at least so you're at the point where one of you won't kill the other while Tasuki and I are sleeping, you know."

His ruby eye twinkled with mischief.

"After all, you'll have to be room-mates, if we find an inn." He added innocently.

The identical looks of horror on Hikari and Shishi's faces made Tasuki let out a low chuckle, tapping his daughter on the shoulder.

"Still want to come, kid?" He murmured. "You can back out, I won't blame you."

"I'm coming." Shishi said obstinately. "Even if I do have to spend time with her. I'm coming, and that's that. Hikari, stop just standing there gawking. I don't want to have to pull you along again, and I'm not going to hang around waiting all day. Come *on*!"

And with a hefty tug, Hikari found herself hauled out of the room towards the narrow corridor that led up to the chambers in which Anzu had first confined her on her last visit to the mountain. Instead of following the same route, however, Shishi led her through a side hallway, and up a different flight of stairs to a small room at the very top. Banging open the door, she gave her companion a little shove, pushing her inside, and Hikari found herself in a bright, if plainly furnished chamber, a wooden chest against one wall, and a bed similar to the one in the other room placed up against the other.

"Well?" The young bandit demanded. "Undress, then. You can't put anything else on over the top of that, and you can't go walking in a skirt like that one."

"Are you going to *watch* me?" Hikari was appalled. "I'm not just stripping off, you know — not till you give me something else to put on first!"

"I was getting to that." Shishi snapped back. "Just do as you're told already. I don't really want you wearing my clothes, you know… I'm going to have to find something that I really don't care about, since it'll probably get wrecked anyway."

"Your clothes are already wrecked." Hikari shot back. "You look like a girl who wants to be a boy. Or a street fighter from one of the stupid computer games that my brother thinks are so cool. I don't want to look like that!"

“What are you babbling about?” Shishi looked non-plussed. “I dress like a bandit, that’s all. I don’t even know what a computer game is — are you insane? Is that what Suzaku’s magic does if it’s inside of you — makes you nuts?”

“I’m not insane and I don’t want to be here any more than you want me to be.” Hikari snapped back, nonetheless beginning to loosen the ribbons that held the top of her outfit in place.

“So why not go home then?” Shishi demanded.

“Because I promised Chichiri and Aidou-san that I’d help.” Hikari said darkly. “And I didn’t ask to be the Shinzahou, you know, so there’s no reason for you to get pissy at me.”

“No reason, huh?” Shishi snorted. “You have Kashira and Chichiri flustering around you saying you have to be protected, when you’re just a damn useless, whining wimp of a girl… and you say there’s no reason? If you weren’t the Shinzahou, noone’d care what you did or where you went, you know.”

“Are you jealous because your father paid me some attention?” Hikari knew she was being catty now, but she didn’t care. “Is that it?”

“Kashira is Kashira. You wouldn’t understand anything about it.” Came the brusque reply, as the bandit threw back the trunk lid, rummaging around inside and then pulling out a few items of clothing, tossing them on the bed. “There. Put that on, and get a move on. If you dress too much like a bandit, people might make the mistake of thinking you’re worth fighting, and there’s no way in hell I’ll ever be wearing this kind of stuff… you can have it with pleasure. You’re that kind of girl, after all.”

Hikari bristled, bending to pick the items up.

“You’re really rude, you know that?” She muttered.

“Well, you’re really pathetic.” Shishi returned. “Shit, can’t you even unlace your own clothing?”

“The knot is tight… I have it now.” Hikari grimaced. “Just stop picking on me already! I’m doing my best, all right? I don’t know anything about your stupid world and it’s not my fault. You’ve been a bitch to me since you found me in the valley and just because you can wave a sword, it doesn’t make you better than I am. You’re younger than me. You need to shut up — if anyone in the grade below spoke to my friends or I like you do, we’d just laugh at them.”

“You’d be laughin’ less, then, when I used the sword to slit your

throat." Shishi said, her tones dangerously low. "It's a good thing for you that Kashira wants you around. Else…"

She trailed off meaningfully, brushing her hand against the hilt of her weapon, and Hikari snorted.

"You wouldn't hurt me. You're bluffing."

"Am I?"

"Yes." Hikari said frankly. "Because *Meikyo* likes you, and I can't imagine she would, if you were that kind of girl. So this must be a special effort for my benefit — and you might as well quit. I don't care if you like me or if you don't. I don't even really want to speak to you, or wear your clothing. I'm only doing this because in the end, I want to go back home. And I can't do that… I can't until I've helped in rescuing your world."

"Now the truth comes out — you don't really want to help at all."

"Yes, I do." Hikari snapped. "Chichiri offered to send me back anyway but I told him not to. I said I'd stay and I will, but you're not making the experience any nicer. Why can't you learn something from Meikyo anyway? She's been nothing but sweet to me since I arrived — she even called me Hikari-neechan, like she'd known me forever. If you are cousins — and she said you are — why is she so gentle and you such a crazed bitch?"

"What have you been doing to Mei-chan?" Shishi's eyes narrowed. "If you've done anything to her with your Suzaku weirdness…"

"What, you're jealous of that, too?" Hikari snorted. "Does everyone belong to you or something? Yeesh. You're such a baby. Of course I didn't do anything to her. She was just nice to me, that's all. She and Chichiri and Eiju and Aidou-san were all nice to me. That's why I'm staying. Because even if *you're* insane, *they're* good people, and I don't want bad things to happen to them."

"Geez, your parents must be glad to get a break from you, if all you do is whine all the time… what the hell kind of world is your world anyway?" Shishi dropped down onto her bed, eying her companion with wary dislike. "And do you ever shut up talking? You must really love the sound of your own voice — do people actually listen to you or do they fall down asleep?"

Hikari sent Shishi a dark glower, but the mention of parents had sparked both doubt and homesickness inside of her and, unwilling to let her companion see her weak enough to cry, she chose not to retort, instead turning her attention to changing out of the long skirted gown

and into the more practical, if still clearly feminine clothing Shishi had tossed her way. She glanced at herself, then shot the bandit a doubtful look.

“Why do you have clothes like this anyway?”

“What now?” Shishi frowned. “What do you mean? I do have clothes, you know.”

“I mean clothes that don’t look like they lost a battle with a dust-cloud… clothes that aren’t half-way to being out of a budget-rate bandit movie?”

“My Grandmother made them.” Shishi snorted. “I never wear anything that girly, if I can get away with it. But Obaachan is sort of hard to argue with. Even Jii-chan and Papa… I mean *Kashira*… have trouble in that department. So it’s easier to shut up an’ just take it, else you might get whacked. That’s all.”

“Grandmother?”

“Yeah… why, don’t you have one of those, or something?” Shishi looked startled. Hikari frowned, nodding her head.

“Yeah. I guess I have… two.” She acknowledged. “But they’re both kind of weird. I only really see one, and her only occasionally. She doesn’t like my Dad all that much, and she and my Mother don’t always speak. I guess I never imagined a bandit’d have other family outside this mountain — I guess there’s no accounting for taste.”

“You’re an idiot, then, because you already know I do. Aunt Aidou an’ Chichiri and Meikyo and Eiju.” Shishi snapped.

“Yes, but… I meant other family.”

“Papa’s the youngest and he has a shitload of sisters. Aidou-obasama is the oldest but the others are just as forceful.” Shishi shrugged. “Papa… Kashira ain’t real keen on women, an’ if you’d met my aunts, you’d know why. Obaachan too. Aidou-obasama is the only one I can stand to be around all that much — she ain’t quite so crazy on the subject of Reikaku-zan as the others.”

Hikari reached up to loose her hair, fingering it thoughtfully, then casting her unwilling guide a glance.

“Do you have something I can use to brush my hair with?” She asked doubtfully. Shishi raised an eyebrow, then nodded, burrowing back into the chest and tossing a brush in her companion’s direction.

“There. Use that. But if you have lice, I’m warning you…”

“Lice?” Hikari paused, staring at the redhead in indignation. “What do you mean, lice?”

“Well, I don’t know what your world is like.” Shishi shrugged her shoulders. “So I’m just saying. If you do, I don’t want them.”

“I don’t have lice.” Hikari snapped. “Or any other kind of nasty bug. I actually wash, you know — something which you look like you could do more of!”

“I bathe every day.” Shishi shot back. “Just because I get a little dusty runnin’ about the mountain don’t make me dirty, you know. Kashira an’ Okaasama both always drummed it into me that way.”

“Your hair looks like you haven’t brushed it in a year.”

“*Your* hair looks like someone skinned a horse an’ used the tail to decorate your head.” Shishi retorted.

Hikari sighed, brushing out her thick, dark hair as she prepared to tie it into its habitual braid.

“I wish you weren’t coming with us.” She said at length. “I don’t want to go anywhere as it is, but at least Chichiri is nice to me. And your father… Genrou… I think he will be, too. But you’re not. And it’s going to be a crappy enough trip without that.”

“Don’t call him Genrou.” Shishi said firmly. “You’re not Aniue or Okaasan and noone calls him Genrou just like that… it’s not polite, an’ you’re just a brat from another world. You’re nothing special.”

“Then what the hell do you think I should call him, brainiac?” Hikari demanded. “Genrou’s his name, isn’t it?”

“Tasuki.” Shishi said evenly. “Because Chichiri said you were one of Suzaku’s people — although the God really messed up when he chose to do anything with you. So call him Tasuki… but *don’t* call him Genrou, like you’re better than every bandit on the mountain. I told you — only Aniue an’ Okaasan call him that. You ain’t qualified, so don’t even try.”

“Fine.” Hikari tied the ribbon in the end of her long hair, tossing the finished article back over her shoulders. “Tasuki then. Either way, you acted like a brat to make him let you come along. And who’s this Jin, anyway? You have a boyfriend or something, stuck in this anthill?”

“A boyfriend?” Shishi stared. Then she burst out laughing. “You’re a real case, you know that? Don’t be dumb. Of course Jin’s not my boyfriend — idiot girl.”

“What, then? Your brother?”

“Uh-uh. I’m Kashira’s only kid.” Shishi shook her head. “Jin’s my friend, that’s all. I guess we’ve grown up together, so in that sense, we are like brother an’ sister a little bit. But shit, he’s not my boyfriend. Like I’d even have time to worry about pathetic, girly things like that when I’m going to be a bandit like my Pa an’ wield the tessen one day. Yeesh. You are literally from another world, an’ that’s for sure.”

“Well, duh.” Hikari snapped back sarcastically. “No surprises to me that you’re an only child, though. I’m sure that *Tasuki* took one look at you when you were born and decided that one was *more* than enough.”

She put special emphasis on the Kashira’s celestial name, and Shishi bristled.

“At least he didn’t fill me full o’ magic so that he could kick me outta my world an’ get rid of me.” She retaliated. “I know what a Shinzahou is, an’ that’s what your mother did. She put Suzaku’s magic into you so that one day you’d wind up here and she’d be rid of you. Shinzahou belong in this world, after all — how does that feel, to know that?”

Thwack!

At this, something inside Hikari snapped and before she knew what she was doing she had lashed out, slapping her companion clean across the cheek as anger glittered in her dark eyes.

“Don’t you *dare* say anything about my family when you don’t know anything about it!” She exclaimed, not far from tears now as she struggled with her emotions. “My mother did no such thing — my mother loves me and you’ve no right to say things like that when you don’t even know her! Besides… besides… if I went back home, it wouldn’t just be Chichiri and his family who’d be killed, but you and your mum and your dad and your stupid mountainful of bandits too! So get that into your thick, stupid head before you shoot your mouth off — because even if you can yell at your dad, you’re *not* going to yell at me!”

With that she turned on her heel, stalking for the door as she felt the tears spill down her cheeks, determined not to let the bewildered bandit see her cry. She flung it back, hurrying down the hall-way as she sought some kind of sanctuary, her homesickness welling up inside of her as she wished — not for the first time — that she had never gone to the library that night.

“Or that I’d never taken the money from Uncle Keisuke.” She whispered, dashing the tears away as more fell. “I did that, and now I’m here… and I don’t want to be stuck in this place with that girl! And what if she’s right… what if that is how Mum and Dad feel about me? They didn’t… come after me. What if they do know where I am… but they don’t care? What if… what if they could come into this world to find me, but… they just don’t want to do it?”

“Woah, girl.”

As she rounded the corner, she ran headlong into someone, almost falling and strong arms grabbed a hold of her shoulders, steadying her on her feet. “Where are you runnin’ off to in such a hurry — and hey, what’s with the waterworks? What’s a girl doin’ running loose around Reikaku-zan — somethin’ happen to you, kid?”

At the friendly tone in the young man’s voice, Hikari swallowed hard, raising her gaze uncomprehendingly to the stranger’s, and he grinned.

“Hey, I know. You’re Hikari, ain’t you?” He said warmly. “But why’re you cryin’? Surely you can’t hate the mountain that much already?”

“How do you know… my name?” Hikari swallowed hard, finally finding her voice.

“Everyone does, right at the moment.” The boy — for yes, he was not much older than she was — cast her another genial smile. He touched her cheek, dashing the tears away, then, “Lemme guess. You an’ Shishi aren’t seein’ eye to eye on a few things — am I right?”

Hikari swallowed hard, nodding her head.

“She’s a bitch and I hate her.” She muttered. “Let me go, will you? I don’t want to be here. I’m going to the village… I’m going to Chichiri. At least he’s nice to me — I don’t want to be with that stupid girl any more, so get out of my way!”

“No can do, kid.” Her companion shook his head. “It’s dangerous on your own, and I doubt you know your way down to the Eastern Village anyway, do you?”

“Not really.” Hikari admitted. “But it’s just… I… I don’t…”

“Shishi’s got a tongue on her, and not much tact or discretion.” The young man looked amused. “But it’s all right. Really. Her bark is worse than her bite — you’ll get used to it, I promise.”

“She said some things… about my family. And the fact I… came

from another world."

"Well, she should know better." Her companion said firmly. "An' I'll tell her so, if you want me to. But stop with the cryin', huh? I'm not sure what to do with you, when you're leakin' like that. And besides, it's not normal to cry all over a stranger — at least, it ain't in this world. I can't speak for yours."

Despite herself, Hikari smiled.

"Sorry." She murmured, obediently drying her eyes, and the bandit's grin widened.

"No problem." He said easily. "Though to be honest, I'm kinda glad you ran into me… even if it was literally. I've been curious to see you, but you were spirited away off the mountain before I got back to it from an errand last night. I'm Jintsui — Jin — an' Kashira's jus' told me that I'm comin' North with you, to Hokkan — right?"

"Jin?" Hikari blinked, then she bit her lip. "*You're* Shishi's friend Jin?"

"Yeah." Jin nodded his head, his tail of dark hair swinging as he did so. "Why? You think I'm taking sides? Believe me, girl fights ain't something I take any sides in… I'm with Kashira on this. Girls are fine, but let them sort out their own shit… besides, you're Suzaku no Miko's daughter, right? So your Ma is a friend of the Kashira. An' Kashira's pretty much family to me — to all of us, on the mountain. So I got no bones with you. We're allies… an' travel companions."

"I guess so." Hikari looked surprised. Then she smiled. "When Shishi said you were coming too, I was worried you'd be ganging up on me, like she has been."

"Well, as I said, Shishi shoots her mouth off before she thinks about it." Jin shrugged his shoulders. "Truth is, she's stir crazy — bein' trapped in the mountain when she's dyin' to see some action. She's so determined to be like Kashira and wield the tessen, but she's a girl, an' understandably noone wants her getting hurt. I mean she's tough — an' good with her blade. But… not everyone sees it like that. An' besides, Kashira'd go up a tree if anythin' happened to her. Anzu-sama too. So…"

He shrugged, sending her a crooked smile.

"She's probably kinda jealous of you. You got invited along and she had to fight her corner." He added. "Kashira said he wanted me to come help keep an eye on the both o' you, and I said I would… but I got the feeling he ain't too happy about Shishi's taggin' along. Thing

is, though, if he said no, she'd trail us anyway. Ain't noone who knows the passages better'n Shishi, except Kashira himself."

"I still don't like her." Hikari said decidedly. She frowned, glancing up at him.

"What is a tessen, anyway? I mean… what's so special about it — whatever it is?"

"You've seen the Kashira's silver fan, right?" Jin looked surprised, and Hikari nodded.

"Sure. What of it?"

"That's it. That's the tessen. Iron fan. Get it?"

"Yes… but… why such a big deal?"

"Well, no doubt you'll get to see, if we meet any trouble on our trip." Jin reflected. "Kashira's always had it, for as long as I can remember. An' before him it was Hakurou, the old boss — he's still a legend in the mountains, too. But Kashira is more powerful — because of Suzaku. The tessen has a holy spell on it — it always did have, even before Kashira was on Reikaku-zan. But because of who Kashira is, it's stronger than it was. It's controlled by the will of the person who holds it — and it throws fire."

"Fire?" Hikari's eyes widened. "As in…?"

"As in red hot flames." Jin nodded. "It's one hell of a sight, I'll tell ya. He ain't had to use it much, not lately. But I've seen it once or twice… I'm tellin' you, if you ever had doubts why Kashira was Kashira…"

He shrugged.

"You'll see." He added. "When we go North."

"I hope we won't meet trouble." Despite herself, Hikari shivered. "I'm really not looking forward to going on this trip."

"It'll be fine." Jin assured her. "Me, I can't wait. Ain't never been so far north as Hokkan. Never been out of Kounan, to tell you the truth."

"Are your family… from near here?"

"Good question." Jin laughed, as if Hikari had just told a joke. "Honestly? Not a clue. My Ma worked near here for a while, when I was little. But we travelled around the southern cities of Kounan quite a lot — she died in Souun, in the end — that's the city at the foot of the mountain — it's Reikaku-zan territory, but it's also near Kaou-zan,

where our rivals hang out, so it's pretty fierce territory, sometimes. Anyway, when Ma died, I kinda just drifted here. No idea what kind of family she came from, or anything about her, really. I was too young to ask and my dad took off before I was even born… I don't know who he was, so I can't really tell you anything about it."

"I… I'm sorry."

"Why? Ain't nothing to cry about with me." Jin grinned. "I was lucky. Wound up wi' Aniki an' Kashira an' learnt the tricks o' the trade. This mountain's home to me now… I don't have any regrets. My Ma wasn't a great ma anyway."

"I see." Hikari bit her lip. "So you've been here a long time."

"Shishi an' I grew up together, almost." Jin nodded. "That's why you can trust me when I say she ain't as bad as you think she is. Jus' give it time. You'll see I'm right."

He grinned at her.

"An' I'll tell her the same about you, because I don't think you're a monster or a freak, either." He said with a shrug. "You might be from another world but you look pretty normal to me."

"I am normal." Hikari objected. "Why wouldn't I be? This is the weird world… not mine."

Jin eyed her keenly, then he laughed, nodding.

"If you say so." He said genially. "Come on. Where did you leave Shishi? Kashira was talkin' to Anzu-sama and Aniki when I left 'em, about keepin' this place running. I got the impression we weren't goin' to be hanging around longer than need be — I think we're headin' to the Eastern Village to meet Chichiri an' then we'll be off. We'd better find the lion cub, else she'll scratch our eyes out."

"We should leave her behind. Serve her right if we did." Hikari said bluntly. Jin raised an eyebrow.

"That bad, huh?" He asked lightly, and Hikari nodded.

"Yes." She agreed flatly. "And I left her in her room. I'm not going back up there, though. So if you want to go look for her, be my guest. But I'm not going."

"Her room?" Jin frowned. "I ain't allowed up there. Girl's room, an' all… Kashira's the only one allowed in Shishi's room, because he's her Pa an' all. Rest of us… mountain rule. Just cos some of us ain't so nice an' cuddly as others, if you know what I mean."

“Nice and…?” Hikari looked bewildered. “No, I haven’t a clue what you mean.”

“Well, let’s put it this way. First time Anzu-sama came to stop here, one of the bandits here then tried t’ rape her, because she was a woman on the mountain an’ that was unusual.” Jin said frankly, and Hikari’s eyes opened wide with alarm. “O’ course, these days, Anzu-sama ain’t the kind of woman you’d think of crossing… she’s got a mean sword arm, for a chick — some people say she was taught some by the Emperor’s father, Hotohori-sama, an’ I ain’t never heard Kashira refute it, so maybe it’s true. Either way, she’s pretty formidable with a blade — besides, she’s Kashira’s woman… so if anyone tried it, I guess Kashira’d be none to amused. He’s pretty laid back most of the time — he’s not into randomly attackin’ fellow bandits. But I figure, there’s a rule for a reason an’ that’s it. Shishi an’ the little one — Chichiri-san’s Meikyo — whenever they’re here, they’re off limits. An’ that includes Shishi’s chamber. So I can’t go get her. You’ll have to.”

“Not happening.” Hikari tossed her head. “I told you. I don’t want her to come. And I’m not speaking to her more than I have to, anyway. Not till she apologises for saying my mother made me the Shinzahou to get rid of me to this world!”

“She said that?” Jin looked startled, and Hikari nodded.

“Yes.” She said evenly. “And it made me mad.”

“Shit, the cub was shooting her mouth off good an’ proper this time.” Jin sighed, then shrugged, offering her a smile. “All right. Well. We’ll go find Kashira. Shishi’ll probably come down on her own, if she’s so keen on travellin’ with us to Hokkan. An’ there’s probably something we can do that’s more useful, in terms of preparin’ what to take with us.”

He grinned at her.

“You didn’t bring anything with you to this world? Nothin’ magical or anythin’ like that?”

“Magical?” Hikari stared, and Jin spread his hands.

“Well, I don’t know what’s in your world. It was just a wondering.” He said easily. “Guess not, huh?”

“I don’t even have my clothes.” Hikari frowned. “All I have is my stupid watch, which doesn’t even work. But I don’t want to take it off, because if I do, I feel like I’ll completely lose myself in this weird place. So no. I don’t have anything to take with me. I’m stuck wearing

Shishi's clothes — or hadn't you noticed?"

"I had. They suit you." Jin remarked. "You're more of a girl than Shishi is, that's for sure."

"That isn't hard." Hikari muttered. Jin just laughed, steering her along the hallway and down some steps towards a chamber at the bottom. From inside came the noise of laughter and voices, and Hikari felt suddenly awkward, Jin's words about Anzu still fresh in her mind. She faltered, and Jin cast her another grin.

"It's all right. I'm not putting you up for market." He said softly. "Not this door. The next. Go on. Knock. The door won't bite ya."

"O… Okay." Hikari did as she was bidden, and at the sound of the bandit's accent, Jin raised his voice.

"It's Jin, Kashira, and Hikari-san is with me. Can we come on in?"

"Yeah, better had." Came the response, and Jin winked at his companion, pushing back the door and leading her inside.

"I thought you were with Shishi?" Tasuki eyed her in confusion, and Hikari pulled a face.

"Shishi is rude." She said firmly. "And I don't like her."

"Did she say something to you, Hikari-chan?" Anzu looked startled, but somehow, in front of the girl's mother, Hikari couldn't bring herself to be quite as explicit as she had been to the forthright Jin. She shrugged.

"She's rude." She repeated. "And I'd had enough. She's still in her room, but I found Jin and he said he'd bring me here."

"Anzu, go get the cub, will you?" Tasuki looked impatient. "Yeesh, bringing girls on any mission creates six times the complications."

"I'll go." Anzu nodded. "Genrou… take care, won't you? I mean, going North."

The bandit paused for a moment, and Hikari saw his gaze soften slightly. He nodded.

"You know me better than to think I'll get killed by a little snow and a couple of jumped up Seiryuu Seishi." He said frankly. "Besides, I don't think Amiboshi'll give us any shit. His brother — maybe, but hopefully it won't come to that. And besides, Chichiri an' I, we can take Suboshi. He was a hothead, but an idiot."

"Just make sure you do." Anzu eyed him for a moment, and Hikari

bit her lip, remembering her mother and father as she saw the unspoken affection between the bandit couple. “And for God’s sake, make sure you bring Shishi back in one piece. All right?”

“I wouldn’t be taking her, but it’s better that than she go of her own accord.” Tasuki grimaced. “I knew showing her all those tunnels was a bad idea… now she’s almost fifteen it’s damn impossible keepin’ her on the mountain. At least if she’s with Chichiri and me, she won’t get into as much trouble. An’ Jin is coming too… so…”

“Yes. I’m glad… Jin, Shishi listens to you, so make sure she doesn’t do anything stupid.” Anzu’s gaze shifted to Jin, who nodded, saluting playfully.

“You got it, Anzu-sama.” he said genially. “Don’t worry. Shishi’ll be just fine. Hikari-san too. I’ll make sure of it.”

Tasuki sighed.

“See…” He said resignedly. “It’s much simpler, when you’re dealing with a guy. You tell him what to do, and he does it.”

Anzu’s eyes twinkled slightly at this, and she glanced at Hikari.

“You do what Genrou and Chichiri tell you, too, okay?” She said softly. “I know you’re new to this world, but none of us want harm to come to you, either.”

“I… I will.” Hikari looked startled, then nodded her head. “I… I promise. I’m not going looking for any trouble, believe me.”

Anzu nodded, smiling at her. Then she was gone, and Tasuki sighed.

“I already have a headache and we haven’t left yet.” He reflected, glancing at Kouji, who smirked appreciatively.

“Anzu an’ me will keep things here.” He assured his companion. “It’s not ideal, but if what you say is true, it can’t be helped. So go an’ come back quickly, okay?”

“You got it.” Tasuki agreed. “With any luck, we’ll hat-hop part of the way, if not all of it, anyway.”

“Hat-hop?” Hikari looked startled. Tasuki nodded.

“Using Chichiri’s *kasa*.” He agreed. “It’s quicker than walking — but it depends what he thinks about it. And what his landings are like — he’s out of practice a little an’ he was never perfect at it before.”

“Oh…” Hikari frowned, pursing her lips. “That was how… when we

went from the mountain to the village. Chichiri said he was a sorcerer… I suppose it didn't really sink in. But all that way — isn't the North a long way off? I mean, is he that powerful?"

"He's pretty strong." Tasuki nodded. "Well, kinda goes without saying, really. He's a Celestial Warrior, ain't he?"

"I don't really know what that means, yet." Hikari sighed. "And you say Dad is one too, but to me he's just a regular guy. It's all still… a bit new and strange."

"I was telling her about the tessen, Kashira." Jin remarked, and Tasuki offered a wolfish smile, nodding his head.

"I see."

"Is that your… Seishi power then? Throwing fire with that?" Hikari asked hesitantly. Tasuki shook his head.

"Naw. I mean, I guess partly it is, but the tessen was throwin' fire before I got my hands on it."

"Then what is… your power?"

"Surviving death, I think." Kouji looked amused, and Tasuki laughed.

"Maybe it is." He responded evenly. "Shit, I don't know. I'm fast, I'm strong, I'm determined. That stuff, I guess. I channel it into firin' the tessen, but I ain't a bad fighter without it. But I don't cast spells, like Chichiri does. I guess I'm just an all round tough kinda guy… that's all."

"Thick skinned, Hikari." Kouji laughed. "That's all. Genrou's always been thick skinned."

"Shut up, idiot." Tasuki cuffed his old friend playfully across the back of the head. "Just make sure this place doesn't fall down in my absence, okay?"

"I've had enough practice — you should know better by now that I can handle the mountain as well as you can, Genrou."

"Maybe… the mountain but not the tessen."

"Yeah, yeah." Kouji shrugged, seemingly unconcerned. "Jus' don't worry about us. We'll be fine. Do what you haveta do. I know the spiel. You're Suzaku's Tasuki again, and that means ol' Kouji-aniki's up. I know. I got it."

"Right. Then as soon as Shishi's here, we'll head to the village an'

see if Chichiri's sweet-talked Aidou." Tasuki reflected. "An' see if we can't sweet talk her into sendin' us with a few snacks to take along the way…"

"If your sister doesn't brain you for goin' off into the wilds, Genrou, it'll be a victory." Kouji pointed out, and Tasuki laughed, shaking his head.

"Naw, not if we're doin' it to protect her brats as much as anythin'." He said evenly. "Women are like that… where kids are concerned."

"Men too, some of 'em." Kouji sent Tasuki a meaningful look, ducking out of the way as his companion snorted, reaching across to cuff him again. Hikari watched them blankly, and seeing her expression, Jin grinned, nudging her playfully.

"S'okay. Kashira an' Aniki grew up together, like Shishi an' me. They're always like this. An' one day, I guess, if Shishi gets her hands on the tessen, we'll be like them too. Maybe."

"Maybe." Hikari echoed, and a flash of the dead, still mountain village flickered into her mind. She shivered, forcing the thought away.

"But we're going to the North so we can stop this." She murmured to herself. "And then… then maybe I can go home!"

Chapter 3

Chapter Two

It was starting to get colder.

As the men of Kutou made their progress across the ever more mountainous country towards the Hokkan-Kutou border, Aoiketsu transferred the reins of his horse into one hand as he pulled his cloak more tightly around his body. Casting a glance around him, he could see that he wasn't the only one who, since they had left the Kutou capital, had begun to feel a distinct chill in the air, and inwardly he wondered whether it was simply apprehension at the task ahead.

"Hunting down a reborn wolf-man." He murmured. "Can we? And if we can — what chance would we have against a Celestial Warrior? They're supposed to be far more powerful than ordinary men — can even the Commander take on a man like that?"

"You look lost in the clouds." Maichu pulled his horse alongside at that moment, casting him a quizzical look. "Are you all right? Not still bugging yourself over… the things we discussed back in the barracks, are ya? Because if you are, snap out of it, all right? This is more important and it'll be a drag of a trip if you're going to be depressed the whole time."

"I wasn't even thinking about that." Aoiketsu pushed his musings aside, sending his friend a sheepish smile. "I was wondering what kind of form Ashitare might have been reborn into, that's all. And whether or not we'll be able to find him and convince him to hand over Yui-sama's Shinzahou. You know what the legends are about Ashitare — that he was a flesh-eater and a monster with genuine wolf blood. Do you think he still is?"

"God knows." Maichu shrugged his shoulders, and Aoiketsu could see a flicker of relief in his friend's eye that the subject of his musing was something so simple. "I haven't given it much thought, to be honest. I'm just stoked to be going along. I don't know what kind of girls they have in Hokkan, but if we're going to Touran, surely there must be stuff going on, right? And we can't spend the whole time searching."

"Do you think the Commander is going to let you stop off to sample the brothels and the beer while we're on an Imperial mission?"

Despite himself, Aoiketsu laughed. “I doubt it, Maichu. You might well have to look but not touch this time around.”

“Even so, I’ve never been to Hokkan.” Maichu seemed unconcerned. “And we don’t get to do this kind of thing often. Besides, it’ll be nice to be in a country where, for once, people aren’t on the verge of trying to kill you for wearing Imperial armour.”

He cast a rueful glance behind him, and Aoiketsu nodded, understanding his implication. As they had ridden through a cluster of northern villages, they had encountered a pocket of resistance which had shouted and yelled at them, some antagonists throwing spears or rocks in their direction as they had navigated the uneven pathway. It was still a day’s ride or more to Hokkan’s border, and riding in open country like this could easily leave them open to attack.

“You’re right. But one day we’ll make Kutou like that.” He said now. “So we can ride wherever we like, and not worry about it. That is why we’re going, isn’t it? When you think of it like that…”

“I know.” Maichu looked uncharacteristically serious. “I guess it is pretty big, fighting for your country’s peace. When we’re old men, Aoi, we’ll sit and talk about this till people tell us to shut the hell up. That is, so long as you manage to get to the end without passin’ out too many times.”

“I’m fine.” Aoiketsu snapped. “Do you see any blood anywhere? I’m not as much of a wimp as to faint for no reason. And I can’t help it, with the blood. I hate it too, you know. It doesn’t make it easier, when you’re ribbing me about it.”

“Hello, we’ve stopped up ahead.” Maichu was not paying attention, reigning in his horse as he saw Hyoushin had halted, holding up a hand to indicate for his companions to follow suit. Aoiketsu frowned, giving a gentle tug on the reins as his beast pranced his hooves slightly, impatient to be moving again.

“Is something up?” He wondered. “We’re miles from any village… this is open land.”

Before Maichu could respond, an arrow came out of the thin weave of trees to their right, followed by another and then another as suddenly, where there had been noone, a cluster of people began to emerge from their hiding places, each one armed and clearly meaning business.

Maichu sighed, his hand going to his belt as he reached for his sword.

“More trouble.” He muttered. “Shit, are we going to get to Touran or not? You’d think these people don’t want peace in Kutou!”

“Who do you suppose it is this time?” Aoiketsu fumbled at his waist for his own blade, not without misgivings as he realised that a full scale skirmish could ensue. As the people drew nearer, it was clear they were men from at least one of Kutou’s many tribes, and that they were not as numerous as they had first seemed. After the first random assault with arrows clearly stolen from previous armed raids on the area, they had resorted to knives and other basic weapons, and as the Kutou soldiers prepared to defend their lives, Hyoushin held up his hand, kicking his horse into action as he rode deliberately between his preparing men and the oncoming dissidents.

“We will not fight.” He said softly, and Aoiketsu and Maichu exchanged bewildered looks.

“Maybe he should tell *them* that.” Maichu muttered. “They look like they want a fight, whatever *we* do.”

“Shh. An order is an order.” Aoiketsu hissed back. “I have faith in the Commander — don’t you?”

Maichu rolled his eyes, but Aoiketsu’s gaze flitted back to the pale man on his white horse as the Commander reached up to remove the heavy Kutou military helmet that protected his head, the crest of Seiryuu clearly emblazoned across the front in glittering blue metal.

At the sight of him, the advancing tribesmen faltered, as if seeing a ghost, and Hyoushin rode purposefully towards them, his expression impassive and his silver tail of hair fluttering in the wind as he drew within striking distance of the group of tribal men.

“Hyoushin-sama!” Aoiketsu exclaimed. “You’ll be killed!”

“Aoiketsu, do as you’re instructed and hold your line.” Came the unsympathetic response. “We will not fight Kutou’s own people in the pursuit of Kutou’s peace. Understood?”

Aoiketsu faltered, then obediently lowered the blade that he had instinctively raised as he had anticipated the threat to his Commander’s life.

Hyoushin turned his attention back to the watching tribesmen who, having registered his presence, were both confused and a little afraid. He eyed them for a moment, then met the gaze of the ringleader. For a moment, nothing moved. Then, in soft tones, too gentle for Aoiketsu to make out, the Commander spoke. Though it was impossible for Aoiketsu to understand from where he was sitting, he clearly saw the

dissident's eyes widen, and the man took a step back, lowering his weapon. Hyoushin nodded his head slowly, as if bowing in acknowledgement, holding his hands up in a particular gesture. Then he turned to his men, flexing his left hand in an indication that they should continue.

"We can go on." He said, raising his voice just enough to be heard by all of his entourage. "There will be *no* destruction of houses or harming of livestock. I have given the word of the Emperor that we are simply passing through towards the Northern border. Noone is to dismount until we are far beyond the settled land we are about to encounter. These people have already suffered enough at the hands of random rebel raids… we will not add to them. I have given them our word… any man who breaks it will meet my blade."

He replaced his helmet, kicking his horse into a canter, and exchanging mystified looks, his men followed his command, picking up their pace as they found the armed tribespeople merely stood and watched them pass, no longer so keen on engaging them in battle. As they passed, Aoiketsu ran his gaze over the men, noticing that some of them were as young as he was or even younger, and he bit his lip as he registered among them one or two with silverish hair.

"Meihi?" He murmured. "Maichu, do you think… these are the Commander's people?"

"The Commander's?" Maichu shook his head. "Don't be stupid. Hyoushin-sama's pale as a ghost. These folk aren't. But he sure talked them round, didn't he?"

"Men do not always need to kill to make their purpose known." As if he had heard Maichu's words, Hyoushin spoke, turning to cast his entourage an enigmatic smile. "And I do not seek to spill the blood of Kutou in the pursuit of its peace. These people only want to defend their land and their families from attack. They are not traitors — they are simply afraid. The mark of a good soldier, Maichu, is to understand the difference between aggression and fear."

"Shit." Maichu muttered. "I didn't realise he could hear me."

"He's right though." Aoiketsu looked thoughtful. "Sometimes fighting is counter-productive. If we'd taken blades to them, wearing Seiryuu's crest how we are, word would spread to the surrounding areas and it might be more trouble for the Emperor in the long run. Especially while there are still people who seek to oppose him."

"True." Maichu sighed. "I guess you're right."

“They look like a whole mix of people.” Aoiketsu reflected, casting a final glance around at the still assembled tribesmen. “Like they’re from lots of different tribes, not just the one.”

“Former slaves, and their successors.” Again, Hyoushin’s sharp ears picked up the soldier’s words, though this time he didn’t turn around. “Such men who have escaped their bonds settle in like communities for security, as their own have been destroyed. That’s all. Nothing to remark upon, Aoiketsu — keep your mind on the task ahead. The fate of slaves who have broken free of their masters is no business of ours — we seek only the treasure hidden in the Northern lands.”

“Yes, sir.” Aoiketsu bit his lip, obediently falling silent, but his thoughts strayed to what he knew about his mentor, and he frowned, turning his words over in his mind.

“Maybe that’s why they backed off. When they saw the Commander was Meihi, and that he bears a slave’s scar on his cheek.” He reflected. “Because he was… one of them, and not just a man of Kutou on a horse. I wonder… if anyone Hyoushin-sama knows is living in this area. If there were any other slaves… but no, that’s impossible. Everyone was killed that day on the Kaiga estate. Everyone except mother, me and Hyoushin-sama. I’ve heard the story enough times — how Kaiga Gin’s people turned on the slaves in fear of an insurgence and slew them all as the Shougun appeared on the horizon, army in tow. All but Hyoushin-sama, who was saved by the Emperor somehow. Still, even so… I suppose there’s a hidden bond between all slaves — former, current… no matter what tribe they belong to.”

As they crested the next rise, the village that the people had massed to protect became visible for the first time, and Hyoushin gestured to the left, indicating that they would skirt around it rather than go through the centre and distress the people who lived there. As they rode alongside it, however, it was clear that the settlement had undergone attack on recent occasions, and Aoiketsu felt a surge of indignation well up inside of him as he registered the charring that some of the buildings still exhibited.

“Hyoushin-sama’s right. They’re just trying to protect themselves… rebels must operate in this area.” He muttered. “We’re so far from the capital, that I guess they must do… the sooner we get Seiryuu’s Shinzahou and can move further towards saving Kutou the better for people like this. Kids who’ve only ever seen war — well, I guess Maichu and I are as much like that as any of them, considering everything. But at least we have a purpose and some kind of protection in the Emperor and Hyoushin-sama’s guidance.”

He clenched his hands more tightly around the reins as his resolve hardened anew.

“I swear we’ll do this, no matter what.” He murmured under his breath. “No matter how hard it is, or how cold it is in Hokkan, or whether or not Ashitare is hostile. We will get the Shinzahou and we will save Kutou — and then *noone* will have to suffer again!”

“So, run it by me again why we’ve stopped a good few miles from the Hokkan border?”

Tasuki leant back against the trunk of the biggest tree, casting his fellow Seishi a dissatisfied look as his travelling companions gazed around them, dazed and a little disorientated by the sudden transfer of being swept into Chichiri’s magic hat. “Chichiri, if it was urgent enough for us to leave right away, why are we goin’ to walk the rest of the way? You’re bein’ as confusing as ever — spill it, will you? I thought we were in a hurry!”

“We are, you know, but even so…” Chichiri glanced at his hat, then shrugged his shoulders, offering his companion a sheepish smile. “I’m worried about Suboshi. Seiryuu’s people are more attuned to chi than most of Suzaku’s ever were. I don’t want to give him any warning that we’re coming.”

“You know we can deal with him!”

“But like I already said, we’re not alone.” Chichiri frowned. “It’s all right, Tasuki… We’re enough out of range right now and I can suppress our chi if we travel via more conventional methods. But if I use my hat, there’s always that risk… and I think we’re better with the element of surprise for now, you know?”

“It’s cold this close to the border.” Shishi shivered, wrapping her cloak more tightly around her as she gazed around her with bright, excited eyes. “Are we going into the mountains, Chichiri? Will we need to hire horses? Or are we going on foot?”

“For now, I think we’re better on foot.” Chichiri reflected. “Horses are expensive and there’s the trouble of returning them. I’m hopeful that, if we can get to Amiboshi’s village and obtain the Shinzahou peacefully, I can then use my *kasa* to take us back to Kounan in one fell swoop. But if we have the complication of steeds to take into accout, that’ll be more difficult.”

He paused, cocking his head as he seemed to be surveying the horizon for something. Then he nodded, gesturing.

“That way.” He added. “There’s still a few hours sunlight left and I think we might make it to a border village by nightfall. I hope we can find an inn then — so we need to get moving. As Shishi said, it’s colder the further north we go, and Hokkan itself can have freezing temperatures… we need to guard against those as much as any enemy we might be facing.”

“So far the North sounds entirely unattractive.” Hikari said frankly, and Tasuki laughed.

“It ain’t the place I have the best memories of either, kid.” He acknowledged. “Last time we spent a lot of time in Hokkan, we wound up buryin’ a friend an’ fightin’ ghosts in a cavern full of bones. I wouldn’t rank it real high on my places to visit, that’s for sure.”

“No kidding.” Hikari shuddered. “*Bones*? Are you kidding me?”

“We’re not going that way today.” Chichiri said evenly. “We don’t have time. We’re heading north-west. Come on — I think we can cut through this forest, you know… my memory is a little hazy, but I’m pretty sure there’s a direct path into the mountain pass if we keep going this way.”

“Sometimes it pays to have someone who’s walked the length an’ breadth of the four lands along on a trip like this.” Tasuki reflected ruefully. “All right, Chichiri. We get it. We’re coming. Jin, make sure Hikari can keep up, huh? Shishi runs riot round mountains most days, but I doubt Hikari’s ever done this kind of a walk before… I don’t remember seein’ many mountains in her world.”

“Hikari’s a wimp, you mean.” Shishi said categorically, casting the older girl a disparaging look. “Is she going to hold us back?”

“I can manage for myself.” Hikari snapped. “So shut up. Noone asked you.”

“You know, you’ll both waste less energy if you stop yelling at each other.” Jin said evenly. “Plus, you’ll give us away to anyone roundabout. Shishi, you know better’n that, don’t you? Set an example, huh — you’re bein’ a girl, instead of a bandit right now.”

Shishi glowered at her friend, folding her arms across her chest, but his words had the desired effect and she turned on her heel, stomping off along the path which her father and his companion had already begun to tread. Jin frowned, shaking his head slowly, then holding out a hand to Hikari.

“You too. You’ll probably need your breath all the more, if you don’t have mountains in your world.” He said.

“I said I can manage, you know.” Hikari pushed the hand away. “It’s all right, Jin. I’m not completely useless. I can get up and down subways and shopping malls, so I can handle a little mountain.”

“Subways and… what now?” Jin looked blank, and Hikari sighed, shaking her head.

“Never mind. Just I can cope, all right?” She said with a grimace. “Really. I’m all right. Just cold and fed up. That’s all.”

Jin shrugged his shoulders.

“Whatever you say, Hikari-san.” He said evenly. “Either way, it’s kinda neat to see different mountains for once, anyway.”

“Do you have to call me… Hikari-san?” Hikari asked. “It makes me feel kind of strange.”

“What do you want me to call you?” Jin looked startled. “We barely know each other, and I thought… bein’ that you were Suzaku no Miko’s daughter an’ all…”

“Hikari is fine.” Hikari replied. “You’re older than me anyway. Aren’t you? And I don’t care about this Suzaku no Miko thing — it doesn’t mean much to me, not really. So call me Hikari — otherwise it sounds like you’re really sucking up or something and I hate that.”

“All right.” Jin spread his hands, offering her a grin. “If that’s how you feel, Hikari it is.”

“What did Aunt Aidou say, Chichiri, when you told her you were going off to Hokkan to save the world?” Shishi asked curiously. “Was she very cross? Papa… Kashira said she yelled at you the last time — did she this time?”

“No.” Chichiri sent his niece a rueful look, shaking his head. “But she did tell me to come back safely. It was sort of nostalgic, you know — I haven’t travelled with *kasa*, *kesa* or *shakujou* for a long time, but I almost feel like the itinerant monk again. I’d have been half tempted to fish out the *kitsune* mask, if Meikyo hadn’t already sequested it away for her games.”

“Believe me, Chichiri, you don’t need that mask.” Tasuki said frankly, amusement on his face. “It makes you look weirder than you are — you’re better off bein’ a one eyed warrior than an always-smiling weirdo. Less distinctive, ya know, on a trip like this.”

“You were a monk? And then you married Aidou-san?” Hikari looked bemused. Chichiri laughed.

“In a manner of speaking, I never really was a monk.” He reflected. “But it was easier, at the time, to withdraw from the world and hone my magic as Chichiri. I’m a sorcerer, Hikari-chan. But I’m not really much of a monk.”

“A sorcerer.” Hikari sighed. “Who can transport people all over the world with a magic hat.”

“Among other things, yes.” Chichiri agreed. “Hopefully, though, we won’t have to use too much of my spiritual magic this time around.”

“Well, if Suboshi’s still a corpse, my fire isn’t going to be much use against him.” Tasuki said bluntly. “We tried that against those Genbu guys, and that didn’t get us anywhere. So if we haveta fight him, it might be down to you.”

“I know.” Chichiri sighed. “But I hope not. I realise that it’s probably a vain hope, but I’d like to visit them in peace. If Tamahome and Miaka can be believed, Amiboshi played a big part in them surviving an attack, at one point. Perhaps he at least will be disposed to be friendly, you know?”

“Guess we’ll see.” Tasuki brushed his tessen absently. “But I vote that, when we get near to wherever they are, the kids stop behind somewhere and wait for us to get the Shinzahou. Just in case it turns messy.”

“We’re not kids.” Shishi objected. “Jin’s seventeen, and I’m fifteen soon. You know I am.”

“And I’m *already* fifteen.” Hikari put in, somewhat cattily, receiving a grotesque grimace for her trouble. “So that means I’m not a kid, either, doesn’t it?”

“Either way, you’ll do as you’re told.” Tasuki said brusquely, glancing between the two young girls, then resting his gaze on Jin. “An’ you’ll be in charge o’ watching them, if it comes to that. You got it, Jin? I’ll be relyin’ on you.”

“It’s already understood, Kashira.” Jin grinned, producing a mock salute. “You can count on me.”

“So if Seiryuu has a… a Shinzahou as well, does that mean that Seiryuu also had a Miko, once?” Hikari wondered, as they moved out of the forestland into more sparcely patched scrubland, hugging her cloak tightly to her body as a chill wind whipped around them. “Because if it does, why are they so messed up? Didn’t you say that the Priestess comes and brings peace and stuff…? Kounan is peaceful because of Mother, and Aunt Mayou… and me. Right? So why isn’t

this Kutou place the same?"

"It's a little complicated, you know." Chichiri sighed, pursing his lips as he considered. "Two Priestesses entered this world at the same time, which was never meant to happen. When your mother was here as Suzaku no Miko, Seiryuu's legend also got sparked into play. What exactly caused it is hard to say, you know. It might have been forces from your world, or forces from this. The point is that Kounan was under threat from Kutou, but Kutou was also under threat from itself. So both countries faced destruction at the same time. It was sort of unprecedented — and it meant that a fight broke out between Kounan and Kutou. When it happened for Genbu, they summoned their God with their Miko and brought peace to Hokkan… even though the threat then was the same, it didn't spark off Seiryuu's legend, you know? Even though the East sought to conquer the North, when Genbu no Miko brought peace to Hokkan, that was the end of Genbu's legend. So I don't know why… when Suzaku no Miko came to this world, Seiryuu no Miko was also brought into the equation. But either way, that's what happened."

"Silly girls having silly girl fights." Tasuki murmured. "That's what it amounts to."

"Girl fights?" Hikari frowned, and Tasuki nodded.

"Your ma, an' another chick from your reality." He agreed. "Yui, Seiryuu no Miko. I don't pretend I understand all the details, but the first time I met that girl was surrounded by that bastard Shougun Nakago and his retinue… she didn't improve on me much, it has to be said."

"Yui…?" Hikari's eyes widened. "My mother has a friend called Yui… do you mean… that *she* was Seiryuu no Miko?"

"Your mother and Yui had something of a conflict of interests, and their fight spilled over into our world, you know." Chichiri admitted. "But I don't think… no, I know that the blame wasn't all with either girl. Nakago did his best to manipulate Seiryuu no Miko into a position of hatred, and so the war ensued. But in the end, he couldn't corrupt her completely. Miaka, your mother, her heart and her belief in her friend was too strong. In the end it was Yui who sealed Suzaku's power, and prevented us from defending Kounan. But it was also Yui who *released* Suzaku's power, and allowed your father to defeat Nakago. And so the war ended."

"Like I said. Girl fights." Tasuki pulled a face. "If it were men, a coupla sword slashes later an' it'd all be settled. But girls go in for all

that complicated emotional mumbo jumbo… it makes no sense to me."

He shrugged.

"Either way, Yui didn't wish for Kutou's peace, an' all of her followers were killed — except for Amiboshi, who we're goin' to see." He added. "In the end, the Seiryuu campaign was kind of a wash."

"That sucks." Shishi pursed her lips. "That she came here and she didn't even try to help Kutou's people."

"I think she did, you know. By unsealing Suzaku, she managed to help remove Nakago, and he was the biggest threat to any existance while he was alive." Chichiri said reflectively. "She was misguided, that's all, Shishi. Jealousy is a cruel master… it can make you do things you never knew you were capable of."

Tasuki shot his friend a sidelong glance, his eyes narrowing for a moment, but he said nothing.

"So hang on a minute. Did *everybody* my mother and father know wind up in this stupid book at one point or another?" Hikari demanded. "Because it's starting to feel that way. Aunt Mayou. Yui-san. Mother. Father. Did Uncle Keisuke and Tetsuya-san come here as well? What about Obaachan? Was it a field trip for half of Tokyo, or what? A day out in the Ancient Chinese fantasy of your dreams? Are there a whole load of books in the stupid National Library that take people to God knows where, huh? Did I just pick the wrong one?"

"Keisuke was Miaka's brother, wasn't he?" Chichiri's ruby eye twinkled with amusement at her impatience. "No, he didn't enter the book. But I imagine he knew as much about it as anyone… he called Tasuki and I to your world, to help defend it against Nakago, so I imagine he must have known a fair bit."

"This world is *not* a book." Shishi said categorically at this point, shooting Hikari an unpleasant look as she kicked a pebble idly out of her path. "Stop talking like we're all story characters or something. We're not, all right? We're people, and just because we come from this world, it doesn't mean we're any different to you. Except, maybe, stronger. And probably a whole lot smarter."

"Shishi-chan, the doorway between Hikari's world and this one is through an enchanted book." Chichiri said gently. "That's all Hikari means. I'm sure she's already realised that we're people, because otherwise she wouldn't be willing to risk her life to stay here and help us save Kounan. Would she?"

“I have no idea.” Shishi said blackly. “But I wish she hadn’t bothered. I don’t see why we need her anyway. If she doesn’t have any powers, what use is she?”

“Shishi, shut your lip.” Tasuki said warningly. “Else Chichiri’s takin’ you right back to the mountain, an’ that’ll be that. I ain’t kiddin’. You let Hikari alone an’ focus on your own progress, all right? As it stands, we don’t need *you* on this little trek — but you still seem to be taggin’ along. So remember that an’ pipe down.”

Shishi’s expression became rebellious, but she said nothing, merely folding her arms across her chest as she stomped onwards. Hikari shot her a triumphant look, but before she could say anything, she met the bandits’ bronze gaze, and words died in her throat as she read his expression.

“This ain’t a game, Hikari, an’ this world ain’t what you’re used to.” He said frankly. “Learn a bit more about it before you start shoutin’, okay? Wherever you’re from, while you’re here, your life’s as much on the line as any of us. You don’t get special favours for bein’ from another world, an’ you’re as disadvantaged as Miaka was in terms of knowin’ what’s what. Shishi’s got a big mouth, but she knows better’n you how to keep her eyes open for danger. So you shut up too, an’ pay attention. You might learn somethin’ from one another, an’ I don’t want to hear you screechin’ at each other all trip.”

“I didn’t start it.”

“But you can finish it.” The wolvish glint in Tasuki’s eye prevented Hikari from taking it any further, and she pulled a face, tossing her head defiantly. Jin cast a look from one girl to the other, then sighed heavily.

“Chichiri-san, where abouts do you s’pose this Amiboshi’s village is?” He asked. “I know you said the border, but that’s gotta be a pretty wide stretch of land — how’re we goin’ to find the right one? Ain’t Hokkan huge?”

“It’s a big country.” Chichiri acknowledged, casting a glance at the sky. “But it’s all right. When we’re there, I’ll have to open up my senses and see if I can detect any trace of Amiboshi or Suboshi. It’ll be a risk, you know, but unless we happen to find another way, it’s the only solution.”

“So in short, we could hat-hop the whole way an’ risk it, if we’re goin’ to be riskin’ it anyway?” Tasuki raised an eyebrow, and Chichiri grinned, shaking his head.

“That’s a last resort, you know.” He said pragmatically. “And it takes a lot more energy to transfer people across land than it does to reach out for someone’s chi. I might be able to conceal myself from them still, if I’m careful… but there’s no way I’d keep hidden such a large flare of my magic. I told you, Seiryuu’s warriors are different from the Suzaku ones. They were always far more adept at sensing chi — of their friends and their enemies alike. We can’t be too careful. We don’t want to spark any kind of violent reaction. And if Suboshi and Amiboshi really are in a village somewhere, we might bring innocent villagers into the fray, too. We can’t risk that, you know? I know this is going to take a little longer, but really, it’s the best method.”

He fingered the fabric of his cape thoughtfully.

“Besides, it’s nice for Shishi and Jin to see the north of their country.” He added cheerfully. “They might not get another chance, you know? We’re a long way from Reikaku-zan, now.”

“Aidou-san said you were from the North of Kounan, Chichiri.” Hikari realised. “Is this near where you were born?”

“No… we’re further north than that.” Chichiri shook her head. “My village, and the northern towns near it are a good two hours ride to the south at the very least, I imagine.”

He smiled.

“I haven’t been there in some time.” He reflected. “When this is over, I must make time to go see Kouran and Hikou again… I’ve been neglectful, but I should go. And to see Mitsukake and Shouka, too — even though I’m pretty sure neither one of them are actually there.”

“Mitsukake was one of your Seishi buddies, wasn’t he, Pa… Kashira?” Shishi reflected, as Tasuki nodded.

“Sure was.” He agreed pensively. “Without him, Shishi, we wouldn’t be here havin’ this conversation, either one of us. But Chichiri’s right. He’s got a new life now. An’ this time, with any luck, he’ll get to lead it his way. He don’t need Suzaku beatin’ down on his back all over again, not in this life.”

“Reincarnation really works, huh.” Hikari bit her lip. “All of your friends were reborn?”

“Yes.” Chichiri nodded. “Mitsukake was the doctor I told you about — the one whose remedies I’ve tried to keep alive with the herbs and other things on the farm Aidou and I tend. But like Tasuki said, his and the other Seishi’s lives are free of Suzaku’s burden, now. It can be a heavy burden, and it comes at a price, so if we can, we’ll keep it that

way. Suzaku chose to keep Tasuki and I… and I wonder now if that was because someone had to be here to protect the Shinzahou, when it appeared. Either way, we're still Suzaku's people — the others are in spirit, but I doubt it will be called out of them this time around. Hopefully Tasuki and I will be enough to help put all this to rights, Hikari-chan. With your help, too, no doubt."

"I really don't feel that powerful." Hikari glanced at her hands. "It would have been better if Dad had come here, instead of me. I mean, if he was powerful enough to defeat a really, really evil bad guy…"

"Have faith in yourself." Chichiri's ruby eye twinkled. "It's there inside of you. You just have to find a way to draw it out. That's all. And I'm sure you will, because otherwise Suzaku wouldn't have sent you to us now, would he? Don't worry, Hikari-chan. I'm sure that you'll know what you have to do, when it comes to it!"

Chapter 4

Chapter Three

Touran.

Hyoushin reined in his white steed, glancing around him at the bustling, thriving outskirts of Hokkan's capital city. Despite the cold chill in the air and the faint signs of snow that dusted the ground, the sky overhead was crisp and clear, a faint breeze teasing gently at his long, silver tail of hair as he gazed up at the wheeling birds that circled overhead. Once they had crossed the Kutou-Hokkan border, he had ordered his men to remove their military helmets and external armour, not wanting to be seen as a military presence as they had ridden through the uneven mountain tracks towards the centre of Hokkan's trade, and more than one of the accompanying soldiers had a faintly bluish look about them, shivering and rubbing their arms as they awaited further instruction from their enigmatic commander.

Well. They had made good time in the end.

Hyoushin gauged the position of the sun in the sky, then turned his attention to his entourage.

"The horses will need to rest, and I can see that it will be necessary for some of you to thaw out before you do any productive reconaissance work." He reflected evenly, taking in their pinched, pale faces as he spoke. "We will stable the beasts, and then see what we can find while Touran is busy. We've arrived a good couple of hours before nightfall, which is earlier than I anticipated, and I would like us not to waste the precious hours of daylight while we have them. After dark, it will get cold, after all — and the best thing to break your chill is to have you active and on your feet, rather than atop a horse."

"*Get* cold?" Hyoushin clearly heard Maichu's voice at this. "Commander, you mean it's going to get *colder* than this? We're already surrounded by snow — can't we at least put our armour back on? I'm getting frostbite in my fingers!"

"A good soldier is unaffected by the elements, Maichu." Came Hyoushin's unsympathetic reply. "As you should well know, considering the length of time you have been training as a man of arms."

He lifted a hand, gesturing in the direction of a tall, white-stone

building on the corner.

"We'll stable there." He said evenly. "And then we'll move on."

As the soldiers abandoned their animals to the care of experienced groomsmen, Hyoushin indicated for them to follow him once more into the centre of the city.

"By the time the moon rises, I want you all back here." He said softly. "We will meet here, beneath this plaque, and I will assign you your rooms for the night. In the meantime, please remember that this isn't a pleasure trip and that we are not here to see the sights of the city… *or* sample the available facilities. Maichu, that goes for you above all others — please keep it in mind."

"Hyoushin-sama?" Maichu stared, and the Meihi gave him a fleeting, impassive smile.

"You will conduct your enquiries in pairs." Was all he said, however. "There are eight of you, plus myself, and that should be sufficient to get a basic overview of the city. We are seeking any information on the Celestial Warrior Ashitare — anything which gives us indication of his true roots and how, if it is possible, we might find him if he has indeed been reborn into a new form. To locate a new Warrior, we need to try and understand the man who died in the Hokkan snow fighting for the Genbu Shinzahou."

He offered Aoiketsu a pensive look, then,

"*You* had better stay with Maichu, Aoiketsu, since I have a little more faith in your discretion than I do his." He reflected absently. "You should both take the northern quarter, which I believe is in that direction, following the street directly behind you."

"Yes sir." Aoiketsu bowed his head, even as Maichu let out an indignant snort, and Hyoushin acknowledged it with another faint smile.

"As for the rest of you, you may assemble as you see fit." He added. "I will take the centre of the city myself… you have about two hours, and I trust none of you will be late."

He gestured, and as one man, the soldiers dispersed with the minimum of fuss, each disappearing into the busy crowds of Touran as they headed off on their mission.

Once alone, Hyoushin turned, glancing up at the plaque which adorned the stone wall he had chosen for their meeting place. It was old, and written in the ancient script that the majority of Hokkan had

long since abandoned, but to him it was like reading a book, for the characters and lines were the same he had been taught by his father as he had learnt to scribe the Meihi tongue as a small boy. Inwardly grateful for having paid such close attention to his studies as a child, he ran his gaze carefully down the plaque, reflecting absently on the surreal nature of reading fluid — if outdated — Chinese language in the letters of his tribe.

"And yet I can understand it more easily than I can read some of the books Kintsusei-sama insisted on making me read when he taught me the characters of Kutou's native tongue." He muttered. "And so much to the good, considering we don't have forever to complete this mission."

He scanned down it, absorbing its contents with a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Koku-zan." He murmured. "Interesting. Ashitare perished, according to Kikei's sources, in the snows beyond the mountain range. But Genbu no Shinzahou was up on Koku-zan… sealed by the power of Genbu. That's an interesting contradiction. If Ashitare went to Koku-zan to retrieve the Shinzahou… what slew him? And if he got past Genbu's protection… what might my men have to face to bring home Seiryuu's treasure?"

He frowned, leaning up against the wall as he contemplated.

"I hope that this is a serious assignment, and that it isn't simply a way for Kikei to get me out of his sight for a while." He reflected. "I have little faith in that man or his methods, but I cannot disobey a direct command from my Emperor. Besides, for *me* to come to the Northern lands is only a matter of logic. With the climate… and to keep the discipline of the men. And yet… I don't like the idea of being so far from Kutou when there is so much uncertainty. That spirit in the flame… I wonder if Seiryuu's magic really is all Kintsusei-sama hopes it will be."

As he turned away from the memorial, he was aware of gazes on him and as he glanced up, his amethyst eyes met the curious dark ones of a little girl, playing by the side of the street. She stared at him for a moment, then she offered him a smile, clasping her ball close to her chest before she hurried off to continue her game. Hyoushin frowned, suppressing the faint flickers of memory that threatened to stir inside of him of another young girl with just as innocent a smile.

"I will keep faith with my Emperor's mission." He decided. "He seeks what I seek, after all. A peace for Kutou like the one the people

have here. That a child can see a stranger on the street and not be afeared… that is what I want for Kutou, too. And so we will press on. Whatever the danger… if Seiryuu's Shinzahou is in the possession of a reborn Ashitare, then we must indeed locate it."

As he mingled through the still-busy trading quarters, he heard snippets of conversation as people concluded their business, greeting and sharing news with acquaintances. Pausing to listen, in case he heard anything of use, he was startled to hear the distinct, melodious sound of his native language, lilting and gentle among the harsher sounds of the northern Hokkan accent. Despite himself, he forgot for a moment the reason for his being there, turning to seek out the speaker, and as he did so, he caught sight of a flash of silver hair glinting in the late afternoon sun. His eyes widened, as for the briefest of instants he lost his grip on his composure and just stared, struggling against the memories that threatened to overwhelm him.

"Ojisan?"

A woman's voice startled him back to himself and he turned, gathering his wits as he met her confused gaze with a level one of his own.

"Ojisan, are you lost? You look disorientated." She spoke slowly, as if assuming he could not understand her, and with a jolt, Hyoushin realised that without his Kutou armour he probably looked no different from the silver-haired ghosts he had heard speaking his own tongue mere seconds before. He offered her an impassive smile, shaking his head.

"No, thank you, I believe I am fine." He said softly, speaking in level, even tones. "But perhaps you can assist me in one matter. Friends and I are visiting Touran for a day or two, and we seek rooms for the night. Is there somewhere you might recommend? We wish to make as early a start to the mountains in the morning as we can — but I have heard that Hokkan's nights are cold, and my… companions are not as immune to the cold as I."

The woman stared at him for a moment, flushing slightly in embarrassment as she held up her hands.

"I'm sorry. I mistook you for Meihi." She said awkwardly.

"That's quite all right… you are not incorrect in your assumption." Hyoushin assured her. "But I am not from Hokkan. I did not know that there were still Meihi in the North country — I had understood that these days they populated the Eastern lands — I myself am from the East."

“Kutou?” The woman looked startled. Then she shook her head. “I didn’t realise they were still… no. There are Meihi in the mountains, sure enough. Many of them fled from the East back to the snowlands when war broke out. You must’ve been one of the fortunate ones… bad times, so as I’ve heard, during the war and before, in the East.”

Hyoushin’s fingers absently brushed against his cheek, fingering his slave scar for a moment, and a brief, ironic smile touched his lips.

“As you say.” He agreed. “I am fortunate indeed.”

“I’m sorry if I caused you offence… the Meihi who surround Touran and the mountain area don’t speak our language so clearly as you do.” The woman clearly seemed to feel she’d made some big faux pas, as she gazed up at him earnestly. “They keep themselves to themselves except when they come to trade at market and buy from the people here. A peaceful, gentle folk — they bother noone — but they don’t speak the same way, and well…”

“You have done nothing to apologise to me for.” Hyoushin assured her briskly. “And if you can point me in the direction of an inn, I will be in your debt.”

“Yes, by all means.” The woman blushed again, nodding her head as she gestured towards a brown stone building across the other side of the road. “There, you might find rooms. They do good business during market season, but of late I know they have rooms free. We had a trading fair here until yesterday, and a travelling circus, and the whole city was packed out. But in the aftermath, there should be vacancies. The rates are good, and it’s within close range of the most easy mountain path.”

“I see.” Hyoushin’s gaze flickered over it, and he nodded approvingly. “And you say we can reach the mountains themselves with ease from here? Without traversing the whole city?”

“Yes.” The woman agreed. “It will mean crossing the Meihi settlements, but I don’t suppose you’ll mind that too much. Koku-zan is immediately ahead of you — that peak you can see in the distance, rising above the others. I imagine that’s where you’ll be going — it’s where most visitors go, when they visit Touran. The legend of Genbu still draws tourists from far and wide.”

“Ah, but it is the legend of *Seiryuu* that holds my interest.” Hyoushin reflected.

“Seiryuu?” The woman looked confused, and Hyoushin nodded.

“One of Seiryuu’s Celestial Warriors was originally from Touran.”

He agreed. “So I have been told. And I believe that he also came here when he died. As a citizen of Kutou, I’m naturally keen to make pilgrimage and find out what I can about such a noble warrior. His name was Ashitare… although I’m sure that means little to Genbu’s people.”

“Ashitare…” The woman frowned, and she shook her head. “I’m sorry, sir. I don’t know much about Seiryuu’s legend, except the names of the stars. I can’t help you.”

“But you already have.” Hyoushin offered her a faint flicker of a smile. “With finding accomodation for my friends and I. I am grateful for your time.”

He bowed his head towards her, then withdrew, crossing the square towards the inn as he ran his thoughts over her words.

“Meihi settlements… Meihi country.” He reflected. “So some slaves did escape, did they? Some Meihi managed to avoid the massacres and the humiliation?”

He faltered, as his memory flickered into life and he stopped, clenching his fists tightly until his nails dug into his skin as he forced them back into their rightful places.

“I am an emissary of Kutou.” He reminded himself. “Nothing more than that. Tomorrow, we will pass through the Meihi lands and scale Koku-zan in search of the place Ashitare lost his life. I cannot imagine Kikei’s sources to be correct, if Genbu no Miko’s treasure was located atop that mountain. He was killed in the obtaining of the holy relic — so he must have gone to Koku-zan at some point. And so there we will go — and see if we can find any trace of anything useful.”

“Wow… we’re really in Hokkan, Jin.”

Shishi pressed her hands up agains the cold, frosted glass of the window, her breath steaming the surface as she gazed out at the slow, swirling blizzard that had begun to build up outside. “I can’t believe people are actually okay with livin’ in this cold freeze, though — it’s not even the middle of winter, an’ yet…”

“It *is* cold.” Jin leant up against the wall of the bedchamber, nodding his head as he sent her a playful grin. “Shishi, you can’t stop the night in here, you know. Chichiri-san an’ Kashira will have finished askin’ the innkeeper questions soon an’ they’ll want to come sleep. An’ you should be with Hikari — after all, you’re a girl an’ so is she.”

“Hikari.” Shishi snorted, turning from the window to cast her companion a derisive look. “I’d rather spend the night here with you.”

“Better be careful what you say, kid — someone might misunderstand your meaning.” Jin’s eyes twinkled with amusement and Shishi snorted again, pulling a face at him.

“*You* know what I mean.”

“Well, you know that ain’t gonna happen, so you might as well get used to the idea.” Jin crossed the chamber, resting his hand on her shoulder as he gazed down into her defiant bronzeish eyes. “Shishi, listen. You an’ me, we only came on this trip because you were so hot to travel with the Kashira. If you start makin’ trouble for them now, he’ll never take you on another trip again, do you get that? Is that what you want — to be confined to the mountain till you’re old enough to be someone’s wife?”

“Wife?” Shishi stared, then shook her head, shuddering at the bare idea. “I’m not going to be anyone’s wife, Jin! I’m going to be Kashira one day… you know it as well as I do!”

“Mm.” Jin eyed her keenly. “So you keep sayin’. But listen, you idiot. You kickin’ up such a fuss ain’t goin’ to help you get to that point, is it? Swallow it an’ go speak to Hikari. She’s on her own at the moment, an’ it’s your job to protect her this evenin’, ain’t it? After all, for the time bein’, she’s one of the pack — isn’t she? So like it or don’t — ain’t you gonna do what your father says an’ show him you’re ready for that kind of responsibility?”

Shishi sighed, chewing on her lip as she registered the truth in her friend’s words.

“I s’pose.” She said reluctantly. “The thing is, though, that she’s such a pathetic idiot of a girl. An’ she really *is* a girl, too, you know. I mean, the kind o’ girl who cares about skirts an’ lookin’ pretty an’ things like that. Walkin’ through the mountains earlier was a pain, too — she said she could manage, but you wound up half carryin’ her the last bit of the way. I jus’ don’t know what to do with that kind of wimp, is all. I ain’t used to bein’ around girls like that — an’ I don’t like it, either.”

“But you’re a girl too, ain’t you?” Jin raised an eyebrow, and Shishi nodded.

“Yes, but I ain’t a wimp.” She said firmly. “An’ that’s the material difference.”

“Hikari’s not as bad as that, you know.” Jin shook his head, looking

pensive. “Considerin’ that she’s come from the other world, an’ everythin’ here is real different to what she’s used to. She’s been dumped in a place without her family or her friends, Shishi — ain’t you even a little bit sorry for her?”

“No.” Shishi said bluntly. “Suzaku no Miko did the same thing, but she came an’ tried to save Kounan — she didn’t just mope an’ complain about achin’ feet or cold winds!”

Jin chuckled, shaking his head in amusement.

“Well, either way, if Kashira finds you in here instead of with Hikari, you’ll be for it.” He said wisely. “So you better snap to it, Shishi-chan — unless you want to be yelled at for shirkin’ your duties.”

“I guess so.” Shishi sighed heavily, nodding her head in resignation. “All right, I’m going. I’m just fed up with her, that’s all. And I can’t even get a few hours break, because I have to share a room with the little idiot an’ pretend I care what happens to her, too. If she had more of a backbone, maybe it’d be all right — I don’t understand why Chichiri an’ Kashira are so keen to protect her, anyway. Or *you*, for that matter. Why do *you* give a damn, Jin? Even if she is a Shinzahou, she ain’t got any kind of magical power that I can see.”

Jin snorted.

“Your eyes are bronze, not green, Shishi.” He said frankly. “Keep ’em that way.”

“What now?” Shishi stared, and Jin rested a hand on her shoulder.

“Kashira is Kashira.” He murmured. “But he’s blood to you. He ain’t blood to Hikari, an’ that ain’t gonna change. Kashira is Genrou of Reikaku-zan but he’s also Tasuki of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi. You jus’ gotta accept that this is the God’s work, an’ that’s all. Jus’ because he an’ Chichiri are payin’ the kid a little attention, it doesn’t mean anythin’ more than that… you ain’t got cause to be jealous, you know.”

“I ain’t jealous!” Shishi’s eyes widened, and she shoved his arm away. “Don’t be so stupid — why would I be jealous? I’ve told you — I’m not asking special favours from Kashira over anything — and I don’t care what he thinks of Hikari or anything else!”

“Mmm.” Jin eyed her for a moment, and Shishi’s expression darkened.

“Don’t be such an ape.” She instructed. “I ain’t jealous of any stuck

up, spoiled little worm from another world. An' I'm goin' to my room, so get out of my way, huh?"

With that she pushed him aside, stalking out of the small chamber and banging the door behind her as she exhibited her displeasure.

They had arrived at the village just as the sun had begun to drop in the sky and, with a murmur of pleasure, Chichiri had announced that they had made better progress than he had expected, crossing over the border into Hokkan itself. The settlement had proved convenient, and Chichiri had soon made arrangements for them to hire out two small rooms rather than one, as the rates for a place so cold and remote were reasonable enough for it to be well within their budget. After all, as he had told them ruefully, the temperatures outside would soon drop below freezing as night set in, and he had been fairly sure that there was snow in the air.

And, as it had happened, he had been proven right, for as they had eaten a simple, hot evening meal, the first whirl of flakes had begun to patter against the glass, spreading and growing into a blinding dervish as they obscured the surrounding landscape in a white haze. For Shishi, for whom snow was a rare, if impossible novelty in the south, it had been a beautiful, breathtaking sight.

"Comin' to Hokkan is all very well, or it would be, if not for her." She muttered now, shaking her head in frustration. "Jin's stupid if he thinks I'm jealous of the little brat… I'd rather die than be like her, that's all. But shit, I guess he's right. Kashira's Kashira an' I have to do my job too — however much I hate it."

With that she sighed, pushing back the door of the other room roughly and slipping inside. Hikari was sitting up against the headboard of her simple, makeshift pallet bed, wrapped in blankets and as the door opened, she visibly started, glaring at her companion in indignation.

"You could knock. I might've been changing."

"Yeah, like I care what you look like with or without clothin'." Shishi said evenly. "I don't like this any more than you do — you could at least do me a favour an' shut your lip for a few hours, okay? I'd like to get some kip, if it's all the same to you — without your bleatin' whine in my ears."

"I'm not whining. I was just saying…"

"Well, don't just say." Shishi cut across her, sinking down onto her own bed as she loosened the fabric of her jacket, slipping it off and

dropping it on the floor beside the bed. “I told you. I’m tired an’ I want to sleep without you complainin’ all night long. Tomorrow we’re travellin’ again — early, most probably… and even if you don’t care about gettin’ any rest inbetween, I do.”

Hikari’s eyes narrowed and she scowled, hugging her knees tightly to her chest as she watched her companion slip beneath the covers.

“You know, in my world, you wouldn’t find a hotel like this one, if you wanted to stay the night.” She said, stifling a shiver as she drew the blankets more closely around her body. “You’d be able to have a nice hot shower, then sit down and watch television and it would actually be warm, not half-frozen to the point where you have to wear your outside clothes to sleep in order to avoid getting frostbite. I really don’t like the North country — it sucks worse than Kounan does so far.”

“Kounan does not suck.” Shishi bristled. “I don’t know what ‘television’ is, but it sounds pretty stupid, if all you do is sit and gawp at it. Besides, of course it’s cold. It’s snowing out, you moron. Or don’t you know that snow means cold? Let me guess, you don’t have snow in your world, either?”

There was sarcasm in her tones, and Hikari grimaced.

“Of course we do.” She muttered. “And I don’t like it any more then than I do right now. It’s cold, wet and disgusting… and everything since we crossed the border seems to be covered in it. My feet were soaking when I took off those… whatever you want to call them boot things… and I’ve already got blisters. But what about you, anyway? Don’t you even feel the cold? Kounan is a lot warmer — why aren’t you shivering?”

“Because I’m a bandit, an’ bandits don’t shiver.” Shishi said evenly. “Sure, it’s cold. But yeesh, that’s how it is. At least we ain’t outside in the blizzard — aren’t you a little bit glad about that? Learn to be grateful for what you have, and stop it with the whining already. Your voice is high pitched and irritating when you do that, an’ God knows what kind of accent you have but it’s really startin’ to rub against my nerves. Shut up an’ sleep… sooner you do, sooner it’ll be mornin’ and the sooner we can head on to find this village we’re lookin’ for.”

“Yeah, as if I can sleep when my feet are pretty much blocks of ice.” Hikari shivered again.

“Then you should’ve stayed on Reikaku-zan, if that’s how you feel about it.”

“I didn’t get a lot of a choice.” Hikari returned. “Tasuki and Chichiri both said I had to come — I didn’t ask to. I didn’t ask to come to this world at all, if you come to that. Don’t talk about choice, Shishi… this isn’t where I want to be right now, believe you me.”

Shishi frowned, pushing back her blankets and padding across the room towards her companion, a dark, irritated look in her bronzeish eyes.

“Listen to me an’ listen good, once an’ for all because I’m done with this.” She said flatly, resting her hands on the other girl’s shoulders and giving her a little shake. “I don’t care what you do or what you don’t want. I don’t care why you came here, or who your Ma an’ Pa are. Chichiri said you stayed in this world because you wanted to help Meikyo but I don’t know if that’s true or not — it sure doesn’t seem it, right at the moment. You’re a worse whinin’ baby than she is — she’s just a kid of eight years old. Even *she* doesn’t whine about things that can’t be helped. You really should be ashamed. *I’m* ashamed for you, every time I hear you complain.”

“I didn’t ask for your opinion, you know.”

“Well, you’re gettin’ it as a freebie.” Shishi’s eyes hardened. “Chichiri, Kashira, Jin — they all seem to think you have somethin’ else about you. That because you’re Shinzahou, you’re goin’ to come good an’ prove you’re more than a wimp who complains about cold feet an’ blisters. But if you do, I ain’t seein’ it. And I’m fed up with it, that’s all. If you have Suzaku’s magic in you, you should quit fussin’ about cold weather an’ worryin’ about finding it. Suzaku no Miko came here an’ did what she had to do — she summoned Suzaku an’ made her wishes an’ everything was okay — we all know the legends, we all know those stories as well as anyone else. But you’re a real disappointment, if you’re really the one she trusted Suzaku’s power to, you know. An’ it makes me mad as hell, especially after hearin’ the story of Seiryuu no Miko an’ all the shit she caused when she chose her own interests over savin’ Kutou. Do you want Kounan to wind up a bloody mess like the Eastern lands? Do you want people here to get killed an’ hurt all over again, because you’re more interested in the temperature an’ some ‘television’ thing than you are people’s lives? Or is it what you said before, huh? Because this ain’t your world — because this is just a ‘story’ to you — you don’t give a shit whether any of us live or die? I don’t think you care about Meikyo or Eiju or anyone but yourself. Even if you’ve fooled Chichiri, even if you’ve fooled Kashira an’ Jin — you don’t fool me, Sukunami Hikari!”

“*Let me go*!”

Hikari wrested her body away, anger glittering in her dark eyes as she shoved her hands against the bandit's body. "Let me go, Shishi — I don't care what you think, and *I don't want to be here with you either*!"

Shishi stumbled back, opening her mouth to retort, but as she did so, she caught sight of her room-mate's body and she stopped dead, eyes opening wide with disbelief and alarm as she registered the odd crimson glow that had engulfed her young companion from head to foot.

"Hikari?" She murmured, reaching out a finger to touch the haze, but before she could brush her hand against the other girl's skin, there was a dazzling flash of red and she found herself pushed backwards, falling against her bed as she stared, not comprehending the scene before her. As the light grew brighter, she covered her eyes against its glare, and when she looked again, she let out a gasp, scrambling to her feet as she darted forwards.

"Hikari?" She exclaimed, as she registered the fact her companion had vanished, and that she was now completely alone in the little bedchamber. "Hikari, damn it, where the hell are you? What did you do? Where did you go… *Hikari*!"

There was no answer, and despite herself, fear flickered in Shishi's heart as she struggled to work out what she'd seen.

"Red light." She whispered. "Shit… what did she do… where's the stupid idiot gone to now?"

"Shishi, are you all right in there?" A knock at the door startled her out of her daze as she realised she had company, and panic gripped her heart as she contemplated how to explain what she had seen.

"Shishi?" Her father's voice came through the wood again and she steeled herself, stumbling to the door as she unfastened the latch, pulling it back.

"What the hell's all the shoutin'?" Tasuki cast her a confused glance, which became consternation as he registered his daughter's stricken expression. "Shishi…? Dammit, snap out of it! What happened? Where… where's Hikari?"

"Gone." At length Shishi managed to choke out an answer, her legs giving way as she sank to the floor, gazing up at her father helplessly. "Papa… she… she's gone."

"Gone?" Tasuki blinked, and Shishi swallowed hard, nodding her head.

“There was… red light.” She whispered. “And then… Hikari… was gone.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Four

"Well, Hyoushin? What have you to report?"

Hyoushin settled himself more comfortably against the wall of the chamber, placing the mirror face up in front of him as he met the concerned, anxious gaze of his Emperor in its misty, enchanted depths. "You've reached Hokkan safely, I trust? There were no troubles along the way?"

"No, my Lord… all has progressed smoothly and we are in Touran, as I anticipated we would be by nightfall." Hyoushin shook his head slightly. "The men are cold, but otherwise they have suffered no ill effects from their trek. All in all, the journey was a relatively smooth one."

"Good." Hyoushin could see the relief flickering in the Emperor's eyes, and he offered a slight smile.

"You seem concerned, Kintsusei-sama — has something occured in our absence?"

"Just more civil uprisings, this time in a town south of the capital." Kintsusei sighed. "I sent what I could to help, but I'm afraid it was too little and too late — our communications have been largely interrupted by the advance of random rebel forces and two of our messengers have been slain in the last day alone. I am glad to hear you have reached Hokkan without incident… I was concerned that you might be a target, travelling as you were through the northern lands which are so far from my direct control."

"We are all trained and prepared to defend ourselves should such an incident arise." Hyoushin assured his emperor with a flick of his fingers. "But I can report that our progress here was largely a peaceful one and no blood was spilt."

"I'm glad about that." The Emperor pursed his lips. "And the Shinzahou? Hyoushin, what news of that?"

"That, my Lord, is more tricky." Hyoushin admitted. "I have sent my men the length and breadth of the city, asking questions of the locals, but have learnt little about Ashitare in his previous life. Reflecting on Kikei-sama's sources, I wonder if perhaps they are

mistaken — I have learnt one thing of use since we arrived, and that is the former location of the Genbu Shinzahou. Kikei-sama's sources indicated Ashitare lost his life obtaining this for Kutou — but the place where Kikei-sama reported he'd died seems quite some distance from the treasure's original location. There is a mountain slope here known as the Black Mountain, and from local information I've ascertained that the Shinzahou was once sealed on this peak. So Ashitare must have gone there, and tomorrow, this is where we will go, also."

"I see." Kintsusei sighed. "It';s so difficult to be accurate when talking about distant, mountainous country and when doing so only through hearsay, not from direct sources. None of the people who accompanied Ashitare on his trip to Hokkan are still here to ask, and that's the truth of it. The Shougun, his fellow Celestial Warriors Soi, Suboshi… Seiryuu no Miko. All are options closed to us. But this is important, Hyoushin, and I have faith in your tenacity and your ability to find Seiryuu no Shinzahou, if it is indeed in the Northern lands."

"Yes, Lord, although it would be easier if Kikei-sama had furnished us with a map." Hyoushin's tones were laced with irony, and his Emperor shook his head.

"I'm sorry… Suiko's words were really not so very clear, were they?" He reflected with a sigh. Hyoushin shook his head.

"I begin to wonder if we have understood them at all." He murmured. "But tomorrow, maybe, all will become more clear. We are, at the very least, in Hokkan. And large as this country is, it is a start… if Seiryuu no Shinzahou is truly located in this area, I will do my best to track it down, Kintsusei-sama. You have my word on that."

"I know, and I'm glad of it." Kintsusei acknowledged. "You are invaluable to me sometimes, more than you realise — find the Shinzahou and come home safely, my friend. Things are uneasy enough here as it is."

For a moment, Hyoushin's violet eyes softened, and he slowly nodded his head.

"Nothing will befall me or my men, and we will not dally." He said evenly. "If tomorrow yields nothing, I will extend our search further afield — but we will not linger here longer than we need. If it proves that Seiryuu no Shinzahou is not anywhere to be found, I shall instruct the men that we are returning home. And perhaps, in the meantime, you might ask Lord Kikei if he can speak to the jezebel in the flames

once again… she was none too helpful with her guidance the last time, and further detail would indeed be of some help."

"I will speak to Kikei, and see what can be done." Kintsusei promised. "All right, Hyoushin. I will let you rest — you will no doubt start early tomorrow, and I will await your further report with eagerness. Take care, old friend… I shall see you soon."

"Indeed." Hyoushin set aside the mirror, as the surface became smoky and then dull. "I wish I could bring you better tidings, Kintsusei-sama… but as it is, I only have scraps to convey."

He touched the edge of the mirror, a thoughtful look flickering in his amethyst eyes.

"Kikei's magic is powerful… I wonder if he is able to force more information from that irritating mage." He murmured. "I don't like how this troubles me — that while I am here, I am not able to be directly involved in protecting my Emperor against potential attacks. I wonder how loyal Kikei is to his leader… whether in a time of trouble, he would put his life on the line to ensure Kintsusei-sama's survival. He is a Hin, true enough — he doesn't lack for courage or spirit beneath his aging exterior. But I wonder…"

He shook his head with a sigh, getting to his feet as he loosed his long tail of hair, letting it fall free around his shoulders.

"Tomorrow we enter into Meihi land." He mused, gazing at his reflection in the mirror for a moment as he touched the scar on his cheek. "I wonder what that will bring — whether the people in those settlements may know more than the people of Touran. If they are refugees from the East — Meihi who fled back to the land of their origins rather than indigenous tribesmen and women who never left… they may have more interest in the fate of a Celestial Warrior than the Hokkan-jin."

He smiled ruefully, shaking his head at the thought.

"No, I have been in Kutou's Imperial palace too long." He realised. "Thinking such things. What use have the Meihi for Beast Gods and stars? They have never been protectors of our people… this scar should have taught me that a long time ago. Am I on a foolish errand? Maybe. But my word is my bond and I cannot break it. My Emperor must have his wish… whatever it takes to achieve it."

"Hyoushin-sama?"

A knock at the door startled him from his reverie and he frowned, recognising Aoiketsu's voice as he turned away from the mirror glass.

“Enter, Aoiketsu.” He said evenly, and the door swung back, revealing the young soldier, a look of uncertainty in his unusual, expressive eyes.

“Yes?” Hyoushin eyed him reflectively. “Something ails you?”

“No sir. It’s not that.” Aoiketsu shook his head. “It’s just… Maichu and I were talking to one of the serving girls downstairs, and she told us something… something I thought you should know, though I don’t know if it’s of any use to us at all.”

“Information about Ashitare, perhaps?” Hyoushin’s eyebrow twitched up, and Aoiketsu nodded his head slowly.

“Yes, sir. At least, I think so.” He agreed cautiously.

“Then come into the room properly, and close the door. Such conversations do not need to be overheard by strangers.”

“Yes, sir.” Aoiketsu did as he was bidden. “Like I said, I don’t know if it matters or if it doesn’t. But she was telling Maichu about the circus performers who had been in Touran up until yesterday. Some of them stayed here, and apparently it was quite a big event.”

“And this has some bearing on our search?”

“I think so.” Aoiketsu looked thoughtful, then he nodded his head. “No, it must do. Commander, Ashitare was from Hokkan, wasn’t he? And… and he was from a tribe who… had connections with… wolves? Beasts of the snow and mountains — isn’t that how the stories go?”

“Indeed, though we have found no trace of any such people living here in Hokkan now.”

“No…” Aoiketsu bit his lip. “But the wench did say that, while the travellers were here, they did talk about… a man like that. That once there had been a mountain beast in the guise of a man, able to speak and communicate yet with a thirst for blood and the flesh of young, innocent girls. They had told the story to either impress or frighten the girls here — I’m not sure which, to be honest — but she seemed more than keen to share it with us. Apparently… one of these beasts they held in their freak show retinue was branded with a blue sign… a mark of Seiryuu, in a land of Genbu’s people.”

“I see.” Interest flickered in Hyoushin’s eyes, and he nodded his head. “This girl was sure of her story? That Ashitare was once a member of a circus who travelled through the four lands?”

“I think more a prisoner of one.” Aoiketsu looked uneasy, and Hyoushin was aware of the boy’s eyes flitting to his superior’s scarred

cheek. “A… a slave, Hyoushin-sama. But he was freed by Nakago — by the Shougun. That’s what the girl said.”

“The Shougun.” Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed to near slits as he digested what had been said. Aoiketsu nodded.

“The men who told her the story described it as a scene of carnage — that all those who’d kept the beast caged were obliterated by some unspoken power and that a man with blond hair and a blue glow about him had taken the prisoner away.” He murmured. “She didn’t call him by name, or really say any more than that. But it *must* have been the Shougun, mustn’t it? Which means that it was Ashitare in that circus… and that Nakago took him to Kutou, as part of Seiryuu’s legend.”

“Indeed, that is how it sounds.” Hyoushin looked thoughtful. “You and Maichu have done well, unearthing this information. It’s a shame we weren’t here before the travellers left, however if what you say is correct, it is an indication that some of Ashitare’s life was indeed spent in Touran. And that it was, as rumours say, the place of his birth — even though he was born a Seishi for Kutou, not for Hokkan. I don’t pretend to understand all of the finer points of how the Beast Gods operate their power. But that seems logical to me.”

“The thing is, sir, how can we find him now?” Aoiketsu looked troubled. “If he has been reborn, he could be anyone of my age or younger, couldn’t he? And if Seiryuu isn’t going to be summoned by a Miko — will he even show any signs of being one of Seiryuu’s Seishi? I don’t know how we can locate him in such a wide-ranging country… he could be anywhere, and we don’t even know for sure he has the treasure.”

Hyoushin sighed.

“I have the same concerns.” He admitted, drawing a startled glance from his young companion. “But it is the will of the Emperor and I will do as he bids me. So must you, Aoiketsu. Our duty is not to doubt or question, but to obey. Besides, it is true that our instruction is vague. That the treasure is in Hokkan, Kikei-sama was quite clear. That it is in the care of a reborn Ashitare — this is less clear. Tomorrow we will ride to Koku-zan and we will see for ourselves the place where, if I am correct, Ashitare lost his life. And then…”

He spread his hands.

“We will wait, search and attend any additional orders from the Emperor.” He said simply. “But you have done well to locate this information, Aoiketsu. You are dismissed.”

“Yes, sir.” Aoiketsu nodded his head, withdrawing from the chamber and shutting the door behind him with a soft click. As he did so, Hyoushin’s lips thinned, and he slowly shook his head.

“More and more I doubt that we are truly looking for Ashitare.” He reflected. “How can a man with the spirit of a wolf — with the drive of a cannibal and an untamed beast — be the guardian of something supposedly holy and divine? And as Aoiketsu says, he would still be so young. But we can do nothing but investigate and then report back. Time to listen to your own advice, Hyoushin. Our duty is to obey, and obey we will. Tomorrow… we will see what secrets Koku-zan can reveal to us.”

“Shishi, run this by me again.”

Chichiri stretched his patterned *kesa* out across the floor of the small inn bed chamber, settling himself atop it as he cast the young bandit an anxious, urgent look. “You were just talking — the two of you — and she was engulfed in red light? Bright, dazzling red light? Is that what you saw? Red light, like the light that powers Tasuki and my celestial marks?”

“Shishi nodded her head, raising frightened eyes to her uncle’s.

“I never saw anything like it before.” She whispered. “Was it… Suzaku, Chichiri? Was it… is that… what you meant by her being the Shinzahou?”

Chichiri frowned, rubbing his temples.

“When she first came into this world, she told me that she’d seen a red light twice — first that brought her from her world to this, and secondly that brought her back from the desert wasteland to this stream of time, where you found her in the valley.” He said slowly. “Yes, I think it probably was the power of Suzaku that did this. But what I don’t understand is why… or how. Hikari is not in command of her powers — not even a little bit. They’re locked up inside of her and although I can feel a faint flickering of something in her aura when she’s nearby, it’s nothing like the kind of energy needed to send someone back through space or time. That she’d just… disappear… it worries me.”

“Do you think she went home, Chichiri-san?” Jin asked from the doorway, leaning up against the doorpost as he surveyed the grim expressions of his travel companions. “Could she have done that — gone back to her own world somehow?”

“It’s possible.” Chichiri bit his lip. “Shishi… there’s nothing else you can tell me? Nothing at all?”

Shishi swallowed hard, glancing at her hands.

“We… did have a… sort of argument, I guess.” She said unwillingly. “She was complaining a whole lot, about how it was cold and her feet were wet and blistered and something about her world and what it was like there. I told her to shut up and let me get some sleep…”

She trailed off.

“Before she vanished, she did say… she didn’t want to be here.” She admitted. “Do you think… did *I*… make her vanish?”

“No, Hikari did it herself, but whether she did it on purpose or by accident is debatable.” Chichiri sighed. “And it creates a problem for us, now. If she’s gone back to her own world, I have no way to reach her. But if she’s still in this one — she could have ended up anywhere. Kounan… Hokkan… this time line or another. The power she has is exceptionally strong, Shishi — stronger than any spell I can perform. Miaka didn’t just seal magic inside of her daughter, she sealed the power of Suzaku… elements of the power that govern and control our world. In unexperienced hands…”

“She could be hurt.” Tasuki said bluntly, pulling his tessen from his back and glancing at it. “And we need to find her… if she’s still in this world to find.”

He glanced at Chichiri.

“Can you trace her chi?” He asked softly. “If she’s still in our world, surely you can do that, can’t you?”

“Ye-e-es.” Chichiri hesitated, and Tasuki frowned.

“Well? What’s the hesitation?” He demanded. “This is Tama’s brat we’re talking about, Chichiri — do you have any idea what that guy’d do to us if we let anything happen to his daughter?”

“I know.” Chichiri looked troubled. “But opening my magic up to search for Hikari means opening it up to anyone and anything that might be in the area. In short, if I do, I might not only give myself away to Suboshi — but I could also lead him to Hikari, because I’m searching for her. She’s too naive to be able to suppress her own life force — and I don’t want to make her a target.”

“So what do we do, then?” Tasuki retorted. “Let her freeze to death? Chichiri!”

“I know!” Chichiri snapped, and Shishi’s eyes widened at the uncharacteristic note of tension in her uncle’s tones. “I realise that… I’m thinking. Short of going looking for her… but not even knowing if she’s even in the vicinity…”

He frowned, burying his head in his hands.

“I don’t know the answer.” He admitted helplessly. “I promised her I’d make sure she was safe… Tamahome and Miaka’s daughter… and I can’t even keep my word.”

Shishi swallowed hard, registering the genuine distress in her uncle’s expression, and she dropped down in front of him, eying him soberly.

“I shouldn’t’ve yelled at her.” She said contritely. “Even if she is a pain in the ass, I shouldn’t’ve. I’m sorry, Chichiri… I didn’t mean it.”

“It’s not your fault, Shishi.” Chichiri cast her a faint smile. “And I don’t really think it’s Hikari’s, either. Because she has so little control… if she went somewhere, I think she did it subconsciously. She might have gone back to the mountain, or Aidou and the children in the Eastern Village. Or she might have crossed back to her world — whenever Taka and Miaka went back there, they were always shrouded in red light. But…”

“You gotta take the risk.” Tasuki said quietly. “To try and find out where she is, Chichiri. Even if it opens us up to a fight, or her, for that matter. We have no choice. If you can trace her, well, we can always transport there quick enough to defend her — can’t we? An’ I don’t mind if we wind up fightin’ Suboshi to protect her. She’s Tama’s kid, after all.”

“This Suboshi is really a threat, isn’t he?” Jin asked hesitantly, and Chichiri spread his hands.

“He has been, in the past.” He admitted. “When Tamahome lived in this world, Suboshi attacked and killed his whole family — his father and his brothers and sisters. When he was killed in the other world, it was trying to bring down Tamahome, and in the end he fell foul of his own brutal weapon. And more than once he sought to hurt Miaka, simply because she was Suzaku no Miko. I don’t say he’s a completely cold-blooded killer, but I doubt he’d have any compunction about killing Hikari on sight, if he knew who she was and why she was here. But Tasuki’s right… I… I don’t really have a choice. I’ll just have to be… careful about it. And hope that I can be guarded enough not to give my position — or worse, hers — away to him before I find her myself.”

“So tell us what to do.” Tasuki’s demeanour relaxed at this and he glanced at his tessen once more, before returning it to its holder.

“There’s nothing you can.” Chichiri said with a sad smile. “Not if I’m going to be discreet — I can’t risk any other life forces being picked up. It’s a complication, you know, but it’s how it is. All you can do is leave me to do my best… and I’ll do that, you have my word. But you might as well get some sleep… it could take a while, and…”

“What if we don’t have a while?” Tasuki demanded.

“We’ll just have to hope we do.” Chichiri bit his lip. “Tasuki, don’t yell at me. I can’t do what I can’t do, you know that.”

Tasuki sighed, but nodded, as if acknowledging his companion’s words, and Shishi’s bronze eyes darted from her father to her uncle, absorbing the seriousness of their expressions.

“I *knew* she was trouble.” She murmured, shaking her head slowly. “Maybe she’s trying to get us all killed.”

“Shishi…” Tasuki met her gaze for a moment, then he sighed.

“Listen.” He said quietly. “You know the legends of Suzaku an’ you know the dangers of followin’ his call. Hikari has no idea of any of that. While she’s in this world, Chichiri an’ I — we have a duty to protect her. For the sake of Suzaku an’ because she’s Miaka an’ Tama’s kid. If you got stranded in that world — or if Meikyo or Eiju did — Tama an’ Miaka would do the same… do you understand?”

“I guess so.” Shishi acknowledged with a grimace. “Yeah, I get it. I do. I just… disappearing…”

“Hikari is not a happy child.” Chichiri said at this point, glancing at the young bandit pensively. “She’s horribly homesick, confused, stuck in a place she doesn’t understand with people who’re pushing her into dangerous situations. You can’t see it, Shishi-chan, but I can — I can feel it in her chi, when she’s here with us. She’s frightened, lonely and afraid… of a lot of things that you take for granted. Even before she came here, I’m not totally convinced that she was… secure with herself. And everything has happened so fast, really, since she first arrived in Kounan. If she complains, it’s only because she’s trying not to cry. And you’d like that even less, I’m sure.”

“Then if she hates us and it that much, maybe she *has* gone home. Maybe it’s a good thing, huh?” Shishi asked. Chichiri’s expression became grave, and he shook his head.

“Whatever is coming, I don’t think we can stop it without Suzaku

no Shinzahou." He said grimly. "That's why Hikari chose to stay here, Shishi. I was serious when I said she wanted to protect my family — she told me that she intended to stay and fight, if she could really make a difference and help Kounan survive. Scared as she is — *alone* as she is — she made that choice. I didn't force it on her, and nor did Tasuki. I would have sent her back if she'd asked me — I'd have found a way to do it. But she was decided. And that takes courage, to make a decision like that. Especially since, in her own world, she's caught in a dispute with her family — one which is still eating away inside of her, whether she talks about it or not. Whether you like her or you don't — whether you understand her or otherwise — Hikari has sacrificed the chance to make peace with her parents, and the opportunity to go back to her own world in order to help save ours."

Shishi faltered for a moment, swallowing hard.

"She ain't so different from a bandit after all, is she?" Jin murmured. "Puttin' herself out to fight her comrades' cause. Maybe you an' she ain't so opposite as I thought, Shishi."

Slowly the young redhead shook her head.

"Guess not." She admitted unwillingly. "But if she's gone home now…?"

"I don't think she has." Chichiri bit his lip, spreading his hands as if trying to pick something up from the room's atmosphere. "I can't explain it, but I think she's still in Hokkan. But it's just a vague sensation… I'd need to do more to pinpoint her exactly, and for that, I need to be on my own, so I can concentrate properly."

"Then I guess we'll let you do that." Tasuki said frankly. "Shishi, you're goin' to have to bed down with us an' let Chichiri do his stuff in here… since this is where the kid vanished, I guess it's better he's here than anywhere. So you'll just have to lump sharin' for once."

"I don't care." Shishi cast a pensive look towards the spot where Hikari had been, then shrugged her shoulders. "I ain't gonna sleep much anyway, I don't think."

"None of us will." Tasuki agreed. "Chichiri, soon as you know somethin', you let me know, all right? I'm ready to move in a second and ghost or not, if that meteor-ball brain tries to hurt Hikari I'll flame him anyway. Got it?"

"I don't think it would do much good against him, you know…"

"I don't care. I'll do it anyway, if he tries to hurt her." Tasuki said bluntly. "So keep it in mind. Don't you go off lookin' on your own —

if you pick her up, I'm comin' too. Right?"

"All right." Chichiri nodded his head. "I promise."

"Right." Tasuki pursed his lips for a moment, an uncharacteristically thoughtful look crossing his expression. Then he gestured to his young companions.

"Both of you, come on. Let the guy do what he has to do."

Shishi gathered up her jacket and her boots, obediently trailing behind Jin and her father into the other chamber as Chichiri raised his hand, closing the door behind them with his strange spiritual magic.

"You all right?" Jin nudged her, and Shishi glanced up at him, then nodded her head.

"I guess." She agreed. "Yeah. I'm fine."

"You look wound up 'bout something… don't tell me *you're* worried about Hikari too, now?"

"I…" Shishi faltered, then she sighed. "I guess I feel a bit shit, if I'm honest about it. I mean, I had no idea she was feelin' like that… or at least, if I did, I didn't bother 'bout it. Truth is, her whinin' got on my nerves an' I told her so. An' I feel like this is my fault somehow, so… even if I *don't* like her…"

She sighed, sinking down onto the floor and resting her chin in her hands.

"It's really true, huh? Her staying for our sakes? That wasn't just her spoutin' off… she really is doin' it to help us out?"

"You heard Chichiri." Her father leant up against the wall, folding his arms across his chest as he eyed her keenly, and Shishi bit her lip.

"What if she vanished because I was yellin' at her, though?" She asked hesitantly.

"Then you should learn to hold your tongue more around people you don't know." Tasuki said evenly. "Don't *you* start with the whinin', Shishi. Chichiri will find Hikari, but he won't get very far if all he can find is you complainin' an' worryin' about someone you don't even like very much."

He glanced across at Jin.

"Do me a favour… run down an' ask the innkeeper for an extra coupl'a blankets." He said softly. "It's gettin' a chill wind in here, an' I don't want one o' you goin' down sick on top of all of this."

“Yes, Kashira.” Jin nodded his head, casting Shishi an encouraging smile, then obediently withdrawing from the chamber, closing the door behind him with a soft click. Once they were alone, Shishi raised her gaze to her companion’s, the glitter of tears in the depths of her bronze eyes.

“I *don’t* like Hikari.” She murmured. “But I didn’t… I don’t want her to get killed because we had a fight. An’ if she’s really feelin’ like that… I mean, if Chichiri is right…”

She faltered, and Tasuki sighed, hauling her to her feet.

“You’re being a girl.” He said, but his tone belied the harshness of his words. “No cryin’, all right? You want Jin to see you cry?”

“No.” Shishi shook her head, fighting with her emotions and winning. “But…”

Tasuki eyed her keenly.

“Chichiri’ll find her, because that’s what he does.” He said softly. “You ain’t ever seen your Pa an’ your Uncle in action before, an’ now you are — now you will. But listen. I told you already this trip wasn’t a pleasure jaunt, an’ that it would be dangerous an’ difficult. Even if you *don’t* like Hikari, you have’ta deal with her bein’ here. That girl might be the one thing standin’ between this world an’ wholesale destruction, if you listen to Chichiri — an’ Taiitsukun said the same, more or less.”

“I…”

Shishi swallowed, then nodded her head.

“I understand, Kashira. I’m sorry. I’ll remember that from now on.”

“Good kid.” Tasuki touched her cheek gently. “Because you told me you were grown enough to come on this trip — are you goin’ to prove yourself wrong before we’ve even really begun?”

Shishi shook her head determinedly.

“No!”

“Then get some sleep.” Tasuki gestured to one of the empty pallets. “If anythin’ happens, you’ll know about it… for now, there ain’t nothing else for you to do, an’ I know what girls are if they don’t get enough shut-eye.”

Shishi sank down on the indicated bed, pursing her lips as she pulled the blankets around her body. At length she glanced up at him.

“Maybe I *didn’t* like that you an’ Chichiri made such a fuss of her, Papa.” She admitted. “But I won’t think it… any more. Because if she… *is* that important… I guess I didn’t believe she *was* the Shinzahou, till… that red light… she must be. She *must* be, an’ so I get it, now. It’s just…”

“You were *jealous*?” Tasuki was floored, taken completely off guard, and Shishi looked rueful. She spread her hands.

“Jin said so, but I told him not.” She replied. “Though maybe… I was a little. I mean, you… an’ Chichiri… an’ Meikyo an’ Eiju — you’re *my* people. An’ Jin is *my* friend. She’s from outside but suddenly everyone’s all about her an’ makin’ exceptions for her an’…all that shit. I didn’t like it much. It didn’t seem fair, especially when you wanted *her* to come to Hokkan but you didn’t want *me*.”

Tasuki was silent for a moment, then he stretched out his right hand, ruffling his fingers through her thick red hair. Beneath the heavy sleeve of his coat, Shishi could just about make out the faint glittering of Suzaku’s mark against his skin, and despite herself, she felt faintly comforted at the sight of it, reminded of the strength that beat within her father’s stocky body.

“I would give a lot to know you were safe on Reikaku-zan right now.” The bandit leader said softly, and Shishi stared at him in surprise at the seriousness in his tones. “But you insist you’re grown an’ I know that sooner or later, you gotta have your chance to prove it. So I gave in… I let you come. Don’t make me regret it, kid… no Father wants their kid rushin’ into dangerous situations, an’ that’s a fact.”

Shishi bit her lip.

“I’m sorry.” She murmured. “I didn’t think…”

She sighed, sinking back against her pillows.

“You *really* think Chichiri will find Hikari?”

“Yes. I do. I have faith in his power, an’ so should you… he’s always come through in the past, an’ he’s a lot stronger than he looks.” Tasuki nodded. “So don’t you worry about that. It might mean a little fight, but we’ll find the girl, an’ we’ll bring her back safely. So you go to sleep… an’ stop botherin’ me with this girly fussing babble, okay?”

“Okay.” Shishi smiled faintly. “Sorry, Kashira. I forgot.”

“Well, don’t forget again, you little idiot,” The solemn moment was

gone, and Tasuki sent her a wolfish smile. He tapped the tessen. “if you really want to earn the right to use this one day.”

“Mmm.” Shishi glanced at the silver fan, then nodded her head. “I guess so. I guess I do have a long way to go, huh, Papa?”

She sighed.

“If… *when* Chichiri finds Hikari, I promise to be nicer to her. At least, I might not like her, but… you know… I’ll stop chewing her out.” She added. “I promise. I’ll remember what you said and I… I’ll try.”

Tasuki nodded approvingly.

“She’s Suzaku’s, but so are you, in a way, because you’re blood to me.” He reminded her. “An’ we’re all doin’ this for Kounan, not ourselves. Keep it in mind too, huh… a bandit leader has to act for his men, not just his own wants. *Whatever* that means.”

“Whatever that means.” Shishi echoed. Then she nodded firmly, settling down against the cool, rough pillow as she gave a little shiver.

“All right.” She agreed. “I get it. Just, I hope Chichiri finds Hikari soon… it’s damn cold even in here, an’ I wouldn’t like to be out there on a night like tonight!”

Chapter 6

Chapter Five

Where in hell *was* she?

Hikari opened her eyes, a mixture of fear and confusion flooding her senses as she realised she was no longer inside the small inn chamber. An icy wind whipped through her young body, causing her to shiver, clutching her clothes more tightly to her body in a vain attempt to shut it out as she struggled to her feet. Dully she realised she was outside, but how she had come to be here, and where exactly here was eluded her. As she gazed around her, looking for some clue as to her location, she found her visibility obscured by dizzy, whirling white flakes and she swallowed hard, feeling disorientated and afraid as she registered the fact she was now quite alone.

"I was… in the inn… fighting with Shishi… again." She murmured, taking a hesitant step or two forwards as she struggled to find her bearings in the falling snow. "And then… now… I'm here. What happened? How did I… why did I…?

She faltered, as another cold breeze rattled past her body, penetrating deep to the bone and she swallowed hard, tears prickling in her dark eyes.

"Chichiri?" She murmured. "Tasuki… Jin? Is anyone there? Can anyone hear me? Is it… a dream… or…?"

There was no answer, and in the stifling blackness of the cruel Hokkan night, the entire world seemed to be a dancing dervish of white specks in a midnight sky. The urge to panic overwhelmed her, but she fought valiantly against it, realising somewhere in her subconscious that if she gave in to it, she would probably perish out in the cold weather. Though their journey had been icy, the temperature had plummeted since the sun had set and, with Chichiri's warnings about Hokkan weather ringing in her ears, she realised that her only chance of surviving the bitter winds and cold, damp snowfall was to keep moving.

"Somehow." She murmured. "I need to… find… Chichiri and the others. How did I get here? What happened, dammit!"

As she gazed around her in one last, hopeless attempt to gain a clue as to her surroundings, she caught sight of something gleaming out of

the black, and her eyes widened as she blinked, unsure whether or not it was real or whether it was a hallucination. In the darkness, almost like a beacon, something glittered and glowed with a vivid blue light, and Hikari stumbled towards it, hoping against hope that it meant some kind of settlement was not far away.

"I must be *somewhere*." She whispered, her legs feeling like lead as a combination of the harsh weather and the day's journey took its toll. Bravely she forced herself forward, determined to reach the source of the glow that provided her only hope, and as she drew closer to it, she found that her efforts had been rewarded. Out of the looming, white-scattered darkness she was sure she could make out the dim shapes of buildings, and as she pushed her heavy, frozen body forward, she was sure she heard the faint sound of a flute on the wind, playing a soft, soothing melody. Something in the instrument's gentle notes soothed her panicked heart and she set her teeth, managing somehow to put one foot in front of the other as she made her way towards the sound.

"A flute… means *someone*… must be here?" She reflected through chattering teeth, her thoughts buzzing in her mind as the cold weather began to rob her of her senses and her coordination. "Surely… someone will help me? *Someone*… will… help me?"

Almost as if her words had been heard, the flute music stopped, and as Hikari's weakened body gave up on the fight against the cold, she was dimly aware of a brightness somewhere ahead of her. A man's voice exclaimed, followed by the sound of footsteps in the snow coming towards her, but the creeping chill was too much for her to resist and she stumbled as the blackness seemed to pour in from all around her, pushing her down into a deep, dark stupor as she crumpled to the icy floor.

"Koutaku?"

As the farmer laid his limp burden down on the floor beside the fire, he glanced up, meeting the horrified, quizzical gaze of his wife. "Koutaku… what? You… where did… she…"

"I don't know." Koutaku admitted. "I just… playing my flute, I felt… something. That there was someone out there… calling for my help."

He frowned, casting a glance down at the unconscious girl, taking in the pallor of her face and the blueness of her lips.

"She's freezing." He murmured. "But she's still alive. Touka, bring blankets… and heat some water. I don't know how long she's been out

there, but she's not dressed for a trip through the snow."

"Of course." Touka got to her feet, nodding her head. "But what was she doing out there? She's just a girl -she can't be more than fifteen or sixteen. Why would she be wandering around in such a blizzard?"

"Papa, what's happening?"

A small voice from the doorway alerted Koutaku to the fact his youngest child was still awake and he bit his lip, casting the small girl a glance.

"It's all right, Kazui. Someone was just taken ill in the snowfall, that's all — your mother and I are going to help her — so it's quite all right."

"Is she dead?" Kazui padded forward, peering at the still body over which her father had already spread a blanket, and Koutaku shook his head.

"No, but she is very cold." He replied. "She's just sleeping, Kazu-chan. I'm sure now she's somewhere warm, she'll wake up soon enough."

He offered her a smile.

"Go back to bed, musume-chan." He added. "It'll be all right, and I'm sorry if we disturbed you. It's late, after all, and tomorrow you're going with Mother to the market, aren't you? If you don't sleep now, you won't be able to get up to go."

Kazui's eyes widened, and she nodded her head, turning on her heel and hurrying out of the room. As she shut the door, Koutaku sighed, sitting back as he surveyed his young companion thoughtfully.

"Where did you come from?" He wondered. "And why was it that I heard your call, even though I was inside and you were out there? Something about you… but I can't place what it is. My memory… it won't cooperate. But there was something in your chi… something that sent out a signal to me. Like an old friend… was calling for my help."

He brushed melting flakes of snow from her hair, touching her cheek as a thoughtful look crossed his expression. Even in the brief time she had been inside his home, her colour was already beginning to improve and Koutaku realised that she had probably not been outside as long as he had first thought.

"But she's not dressed like anyone from Makan, and I think I'd

recognise her more definitively, if she was from this village." He decided.

As though she had felt his touch, the girl's eyelids twitched and fluttered open, confusion flooding her dark eyes as she gazed up at him, struggling to bring him into focus. At the sudden panic that flared in her expression, Koutaku held up his hands, shaking his head.

"I'm not going to hurt you." He said gently. "I promise. You're quite safe here. You were out in the snow, and you collapsed. Luckily for you, you did it outside my farm… it's blowing up a nasty snowstorm outside, but we've plenty of firewood and you'll be quite warm in here."

"Farm…?" The girl echoed the word faintly, struggling to sit up and Koutaku offered her a strong arm, helping her into a more upright position as he wrapped the blanket more firmly around her still shivering shoulders. He nodded.

"That's right." He agreed. "My name's Bu Koutaku, and this is my home. You more or less turned up on my doorstep… can you tell me your name?"

"H… Hikari. Sukunami Hikari." The girl swallowed hard, drawing the coarse blanket more tightly around her as another shiver wracked through her. "I was… in the snow. And then… here? But…"

"What were you doing out in that storm, Hikari-san? Surely you must've realised it was dangerous to travel anywhere in that kind of weather?" Koutaku asked her gently, and Hikari sent him a blank look, wetting her lips.

"I don't know." She admitted weakly. "I was with… friends. And then… I was in the snow… and… where is this place? Am I… still in… Hokkan? Or…"

"Yes. This is Hokkan." Koutaku agreed. "You really are still out of it, aren't you? I guess you're not used to the kind of weather the North can dish out."

Hikari shook her head, but before she could respond, Touka re-entered the chamber, blankets tossed over one arm and a bowl of warm soup in her hands.

"I thought this was better than water, for thawing a frozen body." She said softly, casting Hikari a gentle smile as she set them down on the floor beside the young patient. "You've woken up — I'm glad. You were lucky my husband spotted you — people have been known to perish in this kind of weather, especially at night."

“This is my wife, Touka.” Koutaku explained, at Hikari’s blank look, and the girl sighed, relief touching her expression.

“Thank you for helping me.” She murmured. “I… I should have said that right away, but…”

“Don’t worry about it.” Koutaku shook his head. “Here. Drink Touka’s soup. She’s a good cook, and it’ll warm you up inside. You look like you need it, Hikari-san — your colour is improving, but you still look a little blue.”

Hikari hesitated for a moment, then, gingerly she took the bowl in her hands, taking a tentative sip. Her eyes widened, and she glanced up at Touka in surprise.

“It… tastes really good.” She murmured, and Touka laughed, settling herself on the floor beside her husband as she folded her hands in her lap.

“Thank you, Hikari-san. I do my best.”

“Where have you come from?” Koutaku asked her, as the young girl obediently drained the bowl of soup, setting it aside as she allowed her host to wrap another blanket around her still shivering body. “Somewhere nearby, I’m sure — but you said you were with friends. Are you staying in Makan? I can’t imagine you could’ve got too far, walking in weather like that. But you’re not from this village — I’m certain I’d know if you were.”

“I… I was staying in an inn with friends I was travelling with.” Hikari said slowly. “But I… I don’t know how far away it is. I don’t really know… how I got here. That’s the truth, Koutaku-san. I… don’t really remember.”

“I guess the cold weather’s still fuddled her brain a little.” Touka said sympathetically. “Well, for the time being, there’s nothing else to be done. You can stay the night here with us, Hikari-san — you’ll have to, in any case. The temperature is still dropping outside, and you’ve already had a hefty enough dose of ice and snow for one evening. And then, in the morning, maybe you’ll remember more clearly where your friends are staying.”

“I’ll help you find them.” Koutaku added, as Hikari eyed him in surprise. “If you’re a stranger to Hokkan, you’ll probably need a local’s eye to retrace your steps — the land can look very different after a snowfall than it does before, and you might not be able to find your way on your own.”

“Thank you.” Hikari offered him a faint smile. “That would be…

kind of you. I… I need to find them. I think… they might be worried about me. At least…"

"I'm sure they are." Koutaku agreed. "So first thing in the morning, that's what we'll do. For now, though, you should get some rest."

"I'll go make up somewhere for her to sleep." Touka offered, getting to her feet as she retrieved the empty bowl. "You do look all in, Hikari-san — some rest will do you good."

With that she was gone, and Hikari sighed.

"I'm sorry to put you to trouble." She murmured. "I didn't mean…"

"It's no trouble." Koutaku offered her a grin. "I'm sure you're not the first waif and stray this farm has seen, over the years. You're quite welcome, Hikari-san. Believe me. I'm just glad I was able to help you — and that you managed to find your way here. In the blizzard it can be hard to find anything."

"I heard… a flute." Hikari admitted. "It sounded… gentle. I… I guess that I knew there must be people here, if someone was playing a flute."

"A flute?" Koutaku looked startled, and Hikari nodded.

"It was beautiful." She agreed absently. "Like fairy music. I never heard anything like it before."

Koutaku grinned, stretching out his arm to pick up the narrow wooden pipe that lay on the unit by the fire.

"This flute, perhaps?" He murmured, and Hikari's eyes widened in surprise. Slowly she nodded.

"I… I guess so." She agreed hesitantly, and carefully Koutaku put the instrument to his lips, closing his eyes as he played a brief, soothing melody.

"It was… *you*?" Hikari's expression became one of realisation, and Koutaku nodded, lowering the flute and offering her another grin.

"I've played since I was a little boy." He agreed, as he set his precious burden aside. "Music brings comfort, somehow, and I've always done it. It… it's a very powerful medium, and when it's cold and dark outside, it's nice to soften the atmosphere inside with a little melody."

"It's such a beautiful sound." Hikari agreed. "I think… no, I'm sure it led me to you, Koutaku-san. Your flute… I'm sure it brought me here."

“Perhaps it did.” Koutaku glanced at the instrument for a moment, pursing his lips as he considered her words. “Music has its own strength, that’s something I’ve learnt over the years. And if that’s the case, Hikari-san, I’m glad that it did. Because it meant that we were able to bring you in from the cold… I wouldn’t have liked to guess your chances if you’d stayed out there any longer.”

Hikari shivered involuntarily, shaking her head.

“Me either.” She admitted, and Koutaku was glad to see the colour returning to her cheeks and her lips. “I feel tired… and a little shaky, but I don’t feel so frozen any more. Touka-san’s soup really helped.”

“It has magic qualities, so I like to tell her.” Koutaku’s eyes twinkled, and Hikari managed a faint smile, nodding her head.

“I guess it does.” She agreed.

“Can you stand, do you think? Touka will have made you up a bed to sleep in, but if you can’t get up, I can always carry you — if you’ll let me.” Koutaku eyed her keenly, and Hikari frowned.

“I’ll try and stand.” She said. “My legs are aching, but I think they’re all right. We travelled a long way today… I guess it’s that as much as the cold. I’m not used to walking through mountains.”

“All right, then.” Koutaku nodded, getting to his feet as he offered her his hand, and Hikari accepted it with another faint smile, struggling to her feet.

“This way.” The farmer told her. “You can sleep as long as you like, and then tomorrow we’ll see about finding your travel party. There aren’t many cities in close proximity to Makan-mura, and not many villages, either, so it shouldn’t be too hard to track down which one you and your companions are staying at. When the weather’s cleared, it’ll be much easier to work that out — and I promise I’ll do what I can to help. I know it can be disorientating, being split up from people you know and love… so I’ll do my best to help.”

“You’re really kind, you know.” Hikari remarked absently, and Koutaku looked startled, then he offered her a smile, shaking his head.

“Everyone in this village would do the same.” He reflected. “And my father was always one to open his doors to guests, no matter what their circumstances. He was a good man, and I know he’d want me to help you, too… if he were here. Hokkan might be a cold country, Hikari-san, but its people aren’t. In all the years I’ve lived here, I’ve never found a more gentle, friendly, accepting set of people than the Hokkan-jin.”

“Really?” Hikari looked surprised, as he led her through the halls of the house to the chamber he knew Touka would be busy preparing. He nodded his head.

“Really.” He agreed. “The cold weather and the harsh winters mean that people have to pull together, else they starve. Besides, Hokkan has been at peace for more than two centuries, now. There’s no reason to fight… nothing to fight about. Even with the snow, everyone has what they need, and there are so many different races and peoples settled in the North that it’s impossible for one to act against the other. Hokkan is a large land, after all… there’s plenty of room for everyone.”

He sighed, casting a fleeting glance towards the window as they reached the chamber.

“But this is harsh weather for the Spring.” He admitted. “Even for Hokkan. We’ve had snow a lot later this year than we have in a while — if it goes on, we’ll have to be careful about our crops.”

“I can’t imagine living somewhere this cold, permanently.” Hikari admitted. “It snows back home, of course, but I always try and avoid it. I mean, it’s wet and freezing and it gives you chills. I couldn’t live around it like this.”

Koutaku laughed, shaking his head.

“Oh, I’d rather be fighting the elements than fighting my neighbours.” He reflected. “Believe me, there’s a big difference.”

“It’s all ready for you, Hikari-san.” Touka put in at that moment. “We can’t offer you much more than this for the night, but I hope it will be all right.”

“Right now I could sleep anywhere… so long as it isn’t cold.” Hikari admitted. “Thank… thank you. I… I’ll be fine here. Thank you for being so good to me.”

“It’s no trouble.” Touka rested a gentle hand on her shoulder, flashing her a compassionate smile. “If it were one of my daughters out in the freezing cold, I’d hope someone would do the same for them as we’re doing for you, after all. Get some rest, Hikari-san. In the morning, Koutaku will help you find your friends.”

Hikari nodded slowly, and Touka linked her arm in her husband’s as they left the small chamber, Touka shutting the door behind them.

For a moment, the two looked at one another. Then Koutaku sighed, pursing his lips.

“She said she followed the sound of the flute.” He hazarded. “I guess that’s how she found us.”

“But how *you* found *her*…” Touka frowned, shaking her head. “Not that I’m not glad you did, Koutaku-kun — but with the weather how it is — how did you know she was there?”

“I just… felt she was.” Koutaku’s brows knitted together. “I think it was my music, Touka… I can’t explain it any other way. That somehow she picked up the sound of what I was playing, and through that, I picked up her life force, too.”

“Mm.” Touka looked troubled, and Koutaku shook his head, slipping his hand into hers as he pushed open the door of the main sitting room.

“It’s not like that.” He murmured. “Touka, she was a young girl lost in the snows. What else was I to do? I couldn’t not help her. I know that we’ve agreed that I’ll have nothing more to do with Seiryuu’s power — or with using my flute in any way except as an instrument to bring pleasure to my family. But this was instinctive, and besides, if it did draw me to help her — so much the good, right? I don’t object to still having elements of Seiryuu’s magic, if it means I can save someone’s life, after all.”

“I know.” Touka sighed, nodding her head. “I understand. You’ve always felt that way, Koutaku… and it’s almost taken you away from me enough times. But I do get it. And you’re right — Hikari-san is probably alive because your music locked into her in some way.”

“Then don’t fret about it.” Koutaku smiled, planting a kiss on her forehead, but even as he did so, he remembered the glittering blue light from the stone barn and the whisper of his brother’s words on the wind. “There’s nothing to fear. This is Hokkan, not Kutou. Our family have peace and tranquility, even if the weather is cold this year. You and I are together… and nothing is going to change that. I’m simply Bu Koutaku. Nothing more.”

“Maybe it would have been easier if I’d learnt to call you Kaika, and hadn’t pressed you to bring your memories out.” Touka reflected, but Koutaku shook his head.

“They came on their own, and I wouldn’t have wanted to live a lie.” He told her gently. “I’d want to remember meeting you, after all. Kaika didn’t do that.”

“No, true.” Touka offered him a rueful smile. “All right. I’m sorry. It just worries me, whenever there’s a hint of you using Seiryuu’s power.

Seiryuu is gone and we're miles from Kutou… it's just unsettling. That's all."

"I know." Koutaku acknowledged. "But you've really no reason to fret. As you said, Seiryuu's legend is over. Right?"

"Right." Touka eyed him momentarily, then she nodded her head. "As you say. And I am glad you could save that girl, so I suppose it's all all right."

She grinned.

"Now, if you could find a way to melt the snow…"

"Oh, I wish I could." Koutaku laughed, relief in his eyes at his wife's light hearted remark. "But it'll pass soon enough, I'm sure. Spring must come soon, and if it doesn't, well, I'm sure we'll find a way around it. We'll be fine, Touka. And you know what they say — kindness brings good karma. Maybe Hikari-san's coming is a blessing to our farm in some way — what do you think?"

"I think you're being obscure, as ever." Touka chuckled, touching his cheek affectionately. "I'm sorry, Koutaku. I shouldn't have been so worried about the past. You're right on every count — and you know I love hearing you play your flute. I know you're Koutaku now… and that all of that is in our past."

"Yes." Koutaku murmured, his gaze once more flitting to the window as he had a dim sensation that someone's eyes were watching him from the black. "After all, there really is no need to be Amiboshi now."

He sighed, sensing the disapproval in the invisible watcher's resolute gaze.

"No need." He repeated, more firmly this time, as if to dispel the feeling of unease that curled up suddenly inside of his heart.

"Not any more."

Chapter 7

Chapter Six

There was something in the air.

The chamber was dark, and as Hikari opened her eyes cautiously, memory of where she was flooded back to her. She frowned, realising that it was still the middle of the night, and that she had only been asleep for maybe a couple of hours at most. Glancing around her, she could see nothing and there were no sounds in the corridor outside, so she knew that the farmer and his family were all in bed and sleeping peacefully.

"So what woke me?" She wondered, staring up at the ceiling as she tried to remember what she had been dreaming. "It was just… dark, and snowy… and shadows… like someone was watching over me. But… is it Chichiri? Is this part of his magic — is he trying to *find* me?"

A faint flicker of hope stirred in her heart, but she quickly quelled it when she remembered the Seishi's cautionary words about the men they were going to seek.

"Would he risk pushing so hard to find me that way, if these Seiryuu people are so dangerous?" She wondered with a sigh. "I don't know. Maybe he would. He did say he'd protect me… I wonder, if I was to concentrate on him… maybe he'd be able to find me more easily? I wonder how you do that… do you just close your eyes, and, well, wish?"

She sighed again, then closed her eyes, screwing them up tightly as she focused all of her thoughts on the little party of travellers she had been parted from earlier that afternoon. Feeling stupid at pulling such faces, she was glad that she was surrounded by darkness, but though she tried to pin her thoughts on Chichiri, her mind kept wandering back to the shadows of her dream and at length she gave up, opening her eyes once more.

A face stared down at her, an unreadable expression in his eyes, and at the sudden company, Hikari let out a wild yell, pulling her covers up over her head instinctively as if trying to protect herself from some kind of monster. For a moment she cowered there, then, as nothing happened, she cautiously pushed the blanket back down,

raising uncertain, fearful eyes to the apparition that stood before her.

His expression too registered confusion, and as she stared at him, she realised with a pang of terror that although he was quite clearly visible in front of her, she could make out the edges of the door-frame through his body. She swallowed hard, feeling sick with fright as she realised feverishly that she was face to face with some kind of ghost. She opened her mouth to let out another scream, throwing the blanket in the direction of the spectre as if hoping it might ward him off, and the thick coarse fabric dropped right through his body, causing him to start, and stare at her anew. A strange, bluish aura seemed to flicker around his body, and Hikari swallowed hard, realising that she had probably angered him.

"Go… go away. Get *away* from me!" She exclaimed. "Leave me alone! I don't believe in ghosts… *leave me alone*!"

"Hikari-san!"

The door of the bedroom burst open to reveal Koutaku, a burning candle in his hand and an apprehensive expression on his face. At the sight of him, Hikari scrambled out of her bed, hurrying to his side as she sought to hide behind him.

"It's a ghost… I saw a ghost!" She sobbed. "Watching me! I swear… I saw a *ghost*!"

"Papa, what's wrong with the lady?" A sleepy voice from the corridor alerted the schoolgirl to the fact she'd woken more than just her kind-natured host, and Koutaku frowned, turning back to the corridor as he cast his eldest child a glance.

"Go back to bed, musuko-kun. It's nothing — just a bad dream. She's had a difficult, trying day and it's got too much for her, that's all." He said softly. "Go tell your sisters to stay in bed and go back to sleep… I'll see to Hikari-san. There's nothing to worry about — just a nightmare."

The young boy stared for a moment, as if he'd like to stay, but under his father's firm gaze he nodded, turning around and trailing back towards the little chamber that was his own private domain.

"It wasn't a dream!" Hikari protested, unwilling to look back into the room because she was certain that if she did, the glowing, staring apparition would still be there. "It *wasn't*, Koutaku-san! I really saw a ghost!"

Koutaku eyed her for a moment. Then, gently, he took her by the arm, leading her back into the room as he closed the door, setting the

still burning light down in a holder as the dim flame flickered and glowed. Hikari peered reluctantly around him, her eyes opening wide with surprise as she realised that the chamber was once more empty. She bit her lip, shaking her head as if to clear it, then she stared up at her host, unsure what to say.

Koutaku's attention was not on her, however. Instead he turned towards the bed, a strange expression on his face.

"Shunkaku?" He murmured. "I know you're here… so show yourself to me. Don't hide now."

Hikari swallowed hard as from the dim corners of the chamber, a bluish haze glittered and shimmered into a human form and once more she found herself staring into the bright, defiant eyes of the young man she had seen only moments before. She took a hesitant step back, feeling hard wood behind her as she remembered belatedly that Koutaku had closed the door, and she opened her mouth to scream again. Koutaku was too quick for her, however, pressing a finger to her lips as he shook her head.

"The children are trying to sleep." He murmured admonishingly. "Please. Don't scream. It's all right. I promise."

"But… but… he… it… was… standing right there! *Staring* at me!" Hikari pushed his hand away. "You *can* see him, can't you? You can, even if you didn't say so to your son. You know he's there… there's really a ghost, and you want me to be *calm*?"

"She can see me." The apparition spoke this time, his voice soft and almost echoey in the darkness of the chamber. There was a note of genuine surprise in his tones, and as Hikari stared at him, she realised that he really was not much older than she was, dressed in clothing unlike that worn by her host and his young family. Across his brow, a blue band held thick sandy hair back and with a jolt, Hikari registered that it was the same colour as Koutaku's own. As she swallowed her fear, she recognised several similar features between the man at her side and the spectral boy before her, and she took a deep, shaky breath of air into her lungs.

"Who *is* he?" She whispered. "What… what's going on? What do you mean… of course I can see…"

"Shunkaku is my younger brother." Koutaku said with a sigh. "He… he died when we were young, but he's always protected my family. He… we… its complicated. But Hikari-san, normally I'm the only one who can… see him. I didn't expect… if I'd have known you would, I'd have told you he was here. I didn't mean for you to be so scared."

“Your… *brother*?” Hikari digested this with some difficulty. “But he… died?”

“In battle, for my country.” Shunkaku himself confirmed this, a steely glimmer entering his eyes as he nodded his head.

“And you choose to stay here? To hang around your brother like a swarm of flies, and haunt his family?”

“Protect. Not haunt.” Koutaku corrected.

“It’s still creepy.” Hikari shivered, suddenly cold. “And why were you staring at me? Are you some kind of pervert or something? Just because you’re dead doesn’t mean you can come in on a girl when she’s sleeping like some kind of peeping tom!”

Shunkaku’s expression became one of surprise, and Koutaku shook his head slowly.

“I don’t know why he’s here.” He admitted. “Shunkaku…?”

“She can see me.” Shunkaku turned his gaze on his brother, a frown touching his lips. “She has… something about her, Aniki. Something I don’t trust.”

“Hikari-san is my guest, and you’ve scared her.” Koutaku said reprovingly. “It was my decision to let her stay here this evening, because of the cold outside — you need to stop being so suspicious of everyone and everything, little brother. This is Hokkan… we’re all quite safe here. Go back to the barn — go back to where you should be, please. The girl needs to sleep… and tomorrow she’ll be leaving, anyway, as I’m going to try and help her find her friends.”

“But Aniki…”

“Shunkaku.”

“Fine.” The young spirit sighed, folding his arms across his chest, but as he did so, he faded from view, and Koutaku sighed, rubbing his temples.

“I’m sorry.” He said again. “I never thought you’d be able to see him.”

“I don’t know if I can even sleep now.” Hikari admitted, moving tentatively across the chamber to the bed and pulling the blanket around her shoulders as she approached the window, staring out at the night sky. “He’s always here? All the time? And your family don’t even know it?”

“My brother loves me very much.” Koutaku said softly. “And being

unable to protect his own life, he's dedicated his energy to protecting things he loved in that life. You have to understand, Hikari-san, how close we were. Close enough that even our thoughts sometimes broke into one another's minds without a word being spoken. And for a long time, we were all each other really had."

His expression softened as he rested his hand on the sill, following her gaze out across the land.

"It was Shunkaku who brought Touka to me." He reflected. "I'm sure of that. That somehow he did… what seemed impossible. He's always tried to make sure my life is peaceful and happy, Hikari-san. In some ways, I hate that he has — that he's dedicated to this place, and not able to move on and be at peace. But then… I have no shrine or gravesite to go pay my respects. He died… a long way from this place. And… I suppose I'm selfish too. To lose him completely… it would be hard to do. After all… it's probably true even now that I love him more than anyone else. That was just the nature of the bond we had."

"I suppose I see." Hikari sighed. "He feels the same way, and he doesn't want to lose you either. I suppose when you put it like that, it's not so creepy. But even so…"

She frowned, tracing her finger across the glass as she caught sight of something in the distance.

"Koutaku-san?"

"Yes?" Koutaku eyed her quizzically.

"Is this all your farm's land?"

"Mostly." Koutaku nodded. "It's land left to me by my father when he passed away… Why?"

"That barn too? The one made of stone, right on the far perimeter?"

"Yes… what about it?" Now Koutaku's tone had changed, a flicker of apprehension in his expression as he glanced at her.

"What's that blue light?" Hikari asked softly. "Is it… Shunkaku's ghost? Or… what is it?"

"Blue… light?" Koutaku bit his lip, staring at Hikari as if seeing her for the first time. "You can see… that, too?"

"Yes." Hikari looked confused. "Why wouldn't I — it's right there. When I found your farm earlier… before I heard your flute… it was like that light was guiding me here."

Koutaku stared at her for a moment, as if unable to digest what she

was saying. Then he sighed, slowly shaking his head.

"It's late." He said reluctantly. "And you must be tired… it's too cold to be wandering the house at night. Get some rest, Hikari-san. Tomorrow, we can discuss this all you like, and I will help you find your friends. However, for now…"

"For now…" Hikari echoed, then she sighed. "You promise he won't come back? I don't like the idea of sleeping with some spook watching me do it."

"I promise." Koutaku nodded. "He won't come back."

"All right then." Hikari frowned, nodding her head. "I guess you're right. It *is* cold. And I am tired. But Koutaku-san?"

"Yes?"

"Did I say something… that upset you? You looked at me so strangely just now."

"No… not really." Koutaku shook his head, offering her a smile. "It's just late. Tomorrow morning, Hikari-san… my family will be going to the market, and we can talk properly then, without scaring my children with the idea of ghosts walking the halls of this house. Okay?"

"Okay." Hikari sighed. "Till tomorrow, then. Goodnight, Koutaku-san."

Koutaku cast one last look out of the window, and Hikari had the distinct impression that his gaze had been drawn in the direction of the hut she had pointed out. He said nothing, however, merely inclining his head to acknowledge her words, and then leaving the room, taking his candle with him.

Now alone and once more in darkness, Hikari sank down on the end of her bed, taking a deep breath to steady her heart.

"A haunted farmhouse. Great." She muttered. "This world gets better and better… what the hell next? And why did he look at me like that? Is everyone in this place a little weird, or is it just the cold in the North freezing people's brains? And now I'm meant to sleep, when all I can see is that guy's eyes staring down at me?"

She shivered involuntarily at the memory.

"Whatever Koutaku says about him loving… protecting… he didn't seem that way. He looked *cold*." She whispered. "Like he didn't like what he saw. If Koutaku-san hadn't come in when I screamed… was

he going to *hurt* me?"

They could not have hoped for a better start.

It was barely past daybreak when Hyoushin and his companions left the inn, and as they did so, the commander gazed up at the sky, a faint flicker of approval in his violet eyes. All threat of storms and blizzards had passed with the night moon and that, despite the distinct nip in the air, the day was crisp and clear, a cold winter sun already gleaming on the horizon.

"Ideal for scaling mountain peaks." He reflected, gesturing to his already-shivering party of soldiers to follow his lead as he guided his white steed onto the clear mountain path hewn deliberately into the uneven, ancient rocks. "Today we will discover once and for all what we need to know… somehow I am sure of it."

"Are we going all the way to the top of that mountain, Hyoushin-sama?" One of the men asked, as they skirted away from Touran's town walls and the Meihi turned, nodding his head.

"That is the plan." He agreed, as a slight breeze whipped around him, teasing at his long tail of silver hair and causing stray wisps to pull loose from his warrior's band. "Stay closely together, all of you. The sky is clear and I do not believe we will encounter snow other than beneath our feet — but I do not want us to get separated once we have begun to make the ascent. After all, I intend on returning all of us to Kutou in one piece once we have completed the Emperor's mission."

"It's kind of beautiful, in an austere way." Aoiketsu reflected, and Hyoushin clearly heard Maichu snort at his friend's words.

"Stop talking nonsense, idiot. It's too frigging cold to be beautiful." He retorted. "You have some funny ideas, sometimes, you know — most men would prefer a woman to a great big lump in the ground."

"Most *soldiers* would simply focus on their instruction, without letting their mind stray." Hyoushin observed off-handedly, knowing without even turning to face them that his words had had the desired effect on both his young protegees. He raised his reins, encouraging his horse into a canter with the heels of his boots. "And if we travel a little quicker, it will be less cold."

For a while they rode in silence, crossing snowy, rocky terrain that seemed in places to be all very much the same. However, as they reached a turn in the pathway, the faint curl of smoke in the air

indicated that they were approaching a settlement, and the Commander's eyes narrowed as he remembered his conversation with the woman at the market the day before.

"Meihi." He reflected. "Just as she said."

As they drew closer to the cluster of odd-looking, identical stone houses, Hyoushin halted his horse, holding up his hand to indicate for his companions to follow suit. As the gaggle of cold soldiers obeyed his command, he carefully dismounted the white beast, holding her steady at the reins as he surveyed the land in front of him. It was as the stallholder had said — there was no through path to Koku-zan's immense peak without crossing through the tribal settlement, and as he stood there, gripping the leather thongs tightly between his fingers, he felt a suffocating feeling wash over him, threatening to stifle him completely.

Meihi houses. Meihi people. Meihi language.

From somewhere in the depths of his mind he was sure he could hear the agonised, frightened scream of a mother as her young son was torn from her grasp, and before his eyes he could see the still, silent form of a man, blood staining his soft fabric robes as he lay on the barren, fire-scorched earth. Flames flickered all around him, smoke raising from the remains of the settlement buildings, and in the distance the harsh, barked instructions of the soldiers were punctuated by the panicked cries of children begging for their parents to come and rescue them.

"*Stay with me! Nii-chan, stay with me*!" A small girl's hands reached out towards him, eyes full of tears as she begged him not to go, and Hyoushin could almost feel the touch of her fingers against the fabric of his clothing as he saw himself as a young boy, detatching the grip as he promised,

"*I'll go with Father… I'll go help him stop this! And then I'll come back, Lirayi. I promise, I'll come back! For you, for Mother, for Kaliri. Father and I* ***will*** *protect you — I promise we'll come back!*"

He closed his eyes, feeling nauseous at the bare thought. All around him the children continued to scream, and amid them all was his own, desperate yell, as his father's body fell forward on the ground before him, lifeless and bloody as he died defending his family with nothing more than a stick and his own resolute love.

That day had been the end of Hyoushin's life — the end of his childhood and the end of his innocence. A darkness that he had fought to suppress for so long threatened to well up once more inside of him,

and he fought with his composure, physically forcing the images back as they threatened to take a complete hold of his mind.

Even now, it sickened him to think of such young people as victims of such a cruel act. Children taken as slaves… parents torn apart and slain, people he had known, taken away forever.

"Hyoushin-sama?" Aoiketsu's voice helped steady him to the present and he got a hurried grip on his emotions, slipping his impassive expression back into place as he turned to face the young soldier. Inwardly, gratitude for Aoiketsu's intervention flared in his heart, but he revealed none of that in his glance, as he waited for the boy to speak.

"Why have we stopped?" Aoiketsu asked curiously, gesturing towards the village. "Do you think they're going to attack us or something, sir? Because we only have our swords, no armour… should we be ready for some kind of an assault?"

"These people will not harm us, but our presence here could disturb them." Hyoushin shook his head, well in control of his emotions now. "No, Aoiketsu. We must pass through this land to reach the peak of Koku-zan, where I believe Ashitare retrieved Genbu's Shinzahou and paid for the act with his life. However, we do not wish to cause conflict or excite Hokkan's authorities to the idea that the East have any designs on the Northern lands. I merely wished to ensure you were all aware of this… this nation is not like Kutou, and we must be aware of it at every turn."

"We're *really* going up there, huh? Up *that* one, Commander?" A soldier behind Aoiketsu gestured to the mountain peak, and Hyoushin nodded his head.

"Genbu no Shinzahou was there, so that's where we must go." He agreed. "This is the Emperor's directive. To trace Ashitare's whereabouts. It has occured to me that if there exists such a place atop a mountain where one Shinzahou was housed in the past, it may yet prove to be a location for one now. After all, we have had no luck with Kikei-sama's sources of indication for Touran… we have little else to try but this place, just in case Yui-sama's treasure is indeed sealed in the place Genbu no Shinzahou once lay."

"That does make sense." Maichu sounded unusually thoughtful. "I wish it wasn't so damn cold though… Hyoushin-sama, how do people even live in this climate without freezing to death? I swear, if I have a say in it, I won't be coming North ever again!"

"At least Hokkan is peaceful." There was a slightly wistful note in

Aoiketsu's tones, and Hyoushin's eyes flickered in his direction, seeing, as he often did, a pensive look in the young soldier's unusual eyes. He nodded.

"And with our help, Kutou shall be so also." He said evenly, handing the reins of his horse to a startled Maichu who happened to be the nearest soldier. "Wait here, all of you — and Maichu, hold my horse. I won't be long, but I feel caution is the best course of action. The people here may know more than those within Touran. I will seek their guidance… honey will often get you more than barbs, after all — and several men charging through on horseback may not induce them to be explicit with their knowledge."

"Why would they care about helping us? We're not even from Hokkan — why bother asking them?" Another soldier muttered, loudly enough for Hyoushin's sharp ears to pick it up, and at it, the Meihi's eyes narrowed, his left hand flicking towards his sword as he drew the blade from its scabbard, walking briskly towards the man's horse.

"Hyoushin-sama?" The young man, a guardsman by the name of Kayu stared at his commander uncertainly, as he glanced from the fine silver blade to his companion's steely glance.

"The instruction of Kintsusei-sama is the word of your Emperor." The Meihi said softly, his words slow and deliberate so as not to be misunderstood. "If you have objections about following your ruler's guidance, Kayu, you may dismount. Treason against Kutou's Emperor is treason even if it is carried out within Hokkan's boundaries. Never forget why it is we are here… and what objective we seek."

Kayu's eyes widened, and he held up his hands, shaking his head.

"That's not what I meant." He said hastily. "I'm not objecting to the order, Hyoushin-sama — really, that's not it at all! But I don't understand why these people would be bothered about the East… that's all. I mean, it's our problem, isn't it? It isn't theirs."

"Ah." Hyoushin sheathed his blade, eying the young man for a moment. "Because these are people *from* the East, as well as from the North."

"From the…?" Aoiketsu looked confused. "Really? But how is that possible, sir? What would they be doing here, in the Hokkan mountains?"

"You ask a lot of questions." Hyoushin said softly, arching an eyebrow. "I don't remember that being a part of your brief… do you,

Aoiketsu?"

Aoiketsu flushed, shaking his head, and Hyoushin nodded his head.

"That is what I thought." He replied. "Wait here, all of you. I will speak to the people… your presence may alarm them — especially if they realise you are from Kutou."

Before any of the other men could query his unusual decision any further, Hyoushin turned on his heel, approaching the boundaries of the settlement, not without faint misgivings stirring in his heart. As he stepped between the uneven stone walls that marked the edge of the Meihi village, he felt a sense of sad nostalgia wash over him and he smiled ruefully, shaking his head.

"I am not here for this." He murmured. "But I would rather face this on my own first of all, before I bring them through here. I did not anticipate meeting Meihi on my trip to Hokkan and I do not know how it might be — I would rather cover all the bases and besides, it is possible they may speak to one of their own kind, rather than to ones so clearly from the East."

As he drew closer to the centre of the settlement, he was aware of eyes on him and as he glanced up, a man in his middle years strode forwards, holding his hands up in a greeting that Hyoushin had not seen since he had been a very little boy. He hesitated for a moment, then drew his hands up to imitate the gesture, and the man smiled, inclining his head.

"You're a stranger to these parts." He said quietly, speaking in the same lilting Meihi tones that Hyoushin had striven so hard to shut out for so long. "Yet you are of our blood, clear enough. Your cheek is marked with the sign of slavery, my son — have you come from the East, seeking sanctuary?"

"From the East, yes, Father… but not for sanctuary." Hyoushin responded in the same tongue, the words feeling strange and bittersweet as they passed his lips. "I am here seeking something belonging to friends of mine in Kutou — something which will go someway, it's hoped, towards freeing people still caught in bonds. I am no longer a slave, although I have been, in the past. And I seek to ensure the freedom of other slaves. I didn't know till I arrived here that there were Meihi once again in the North… that others like me had escaped their bonds and sought to make a new start."

"Friends in Kutou?" The village elder looked startled, and Hyoushin nodded his head.

“One friend in particular.” He agreed. “A man to whom I owe both my life and my freedom… a debt which can never fully be repaid. You are Meihi as sure as I, Father. You know my debt to him goes beyond anything else.”

“Indeed.” The older man bowed his head in understanding. “Then how can I help you, traveller from the East? Have you a name, that I can welcome a fellow Meihi to my village as brother and friend?”

“Hyoushin.” Hyoushin said quietly, and the old man eyed him keenly, cocking his head on one side as he surveyed him with bright, violet eyes.

“A Kutou name.” He murmured.

“Such my saviour has named me, Father, yes.”

“And your true name? As a Meihi, what were you born?”

“I remember no other name, Father. Hyoushin is my name, and the only one I know.” Hyoushin said evenly. “If I had a name before, it has been lost… along with the rest of my past before my rescue.”

“I see.” Understanding flickered across the man’s expression and as it did so, Hyoushin saw the edge of a white mark coursing his companion’s cheek. “Well, and the wounds of a slave run deeply, that’s true enough. Hyoushin it is, then. And how may I help you, Hyoushin from the Eastern lands? What do you seek, that you come to Meihi territory and scale Koku-zan in such cold, bitter weather?”

“I do not feel the cold, Father, as I am sure you know. But it is true that my companions do and I do not seek to make them wait longer than I must.” Hyoushin said briskly. “I seek only your permission for us to ride through your village in pursuit of our goal — in this you have my word in bond that no harm will befall your settlement. My friends are men from the East, and having heard from someone in the city how many of your kind are refugees like I — I wanted to make sure you knew there would be no conflict or threat to your people if we were granted passage.”

“The word of a fellow Meihi will always be trusted.” The old man smiled. “You and your friends may pass, Hyoushin. You are as we are — and we seek no trouble with the East or anyone else, now. We have peace, once again… we have no reason to expect further war.”

“Indeed, then you are fortunate.” Hyoushin observed, casting a glance around him as he realised slowly but surely others of the village’s settlers had crept from their houses and buildings to watch the discussion. Some were of his age or younger, bearing similar scars

on their faces, and a few had suffered disfiguring injuries which marred their ghostly, chiselled features cruelly with ugly, weaving scars. Some, however, were just small children, the next generation of Meihi growing up in a place safe from conflict, and for a moment, a sad smile touched his face as he surveyed them. Catching his gaze, the old man nodded his head.

"We are." He said softly. "Perhaps one day you too will find that peace, Hyoushin — when you are able to find the courage to speak your true name without fearing the memories it might invoke."

Hyoushin stared at his companion, momentarily startled out of his composed state, and the man chuckled, resting his hand on the soldier's shoulder.

"I too was a slave, once." He said softly. "I understand what it is, to escape that past. You and your friends may pass through here in peace. My people will not bother you — I hope you find what you are seeking."

"I'm beginning to doubt we will, but I thank you anyway." Hyoushin's gaze flitted to the mountain peak. "We seek traces of the Seiryuu Celestial Warrior, Ashitare… a man of the Dragon God, who died in these parts, and who was also born in Hokkan. Tell me, Father, before I return to my companions — have you heard legends of any such thing in these parts?"

"The wolf Ashitare was buried not far from my village, in the form of a beast, not as a man." The old man reflected. "It has long been a legend among our people, of the tribe whose blood runs thick with that of the wolf as well as the man. Do you not know such stories from your own childhood? Demons from the snowy mountains, who devour the flesh of humans?"

"I have encountered other demons in my life, Father — demons who take human form, and bear whips and other instruments of pain." Hyoushin said levelly. "But in the East, I remember hearing no such stories of wolves."

His companion shrugged.

"Such was Ashitare." He murmured. "You may go to the mountain, Hyoushin, and seek what you seek. But you will not find the Wolf. His spirit still stalks the lands hereabouts, and on the coldest nights, he howls his pain to the moon. He is not a man with whom you can reason, nor an animal you can tame. He is simply an essence in the wind… whatever you seek him for, you will not be able to reach him. He is dead."

Hyoushin's eyes narrowed, as he once more considered the possibility Kikei had deceived them. Slowly he nodded.

"Such was my concern also… I appreciate your help." He said softly. "We will make the ascent, but as you say, I imagine it will be a wasted trip. Still, I gave my word to complete this mission, and I will not break it."

He bowed his head, drawing his hands together in a gesture of peace.

"Thank you for your assistance, Father." He murmured. "I appreciate your time."

With that he turned, making his way slowly back towards the waiting soldiers, deep in thought as he considered the old man's words.

"A spirit who howls to the moon — an essence beyond life and death." He murmured. "Such a beast cannot be a reborn Celestial Warrior… then Suiko has deceived us? Or Kikei has? Or someone is mistaken. Is Seiryuu's treasure really in the Northern lands? Before and beyond the grave… what does that truly mean? If not Ashitare, the man of the snow mountains — who else? We are pursuing dead leads, and yet I don't know what else to do."

"Hyoushin-sama!" As he re-emerged from the settlement, he raised his head, offering his gathered men a faint smile.

"Well?" He said softly, holding out his hands for the reins of his horse. "We have their blessing. We will ride to the top — and we will see if there is any purpose in continuing this hunt for Ashitare."

"Thank goodness. I think my hands might drop off if we sit here much longer." Maichu shivered, pulling his cloak more tightly around him. "If it's this cold here, what's it going to be like on the mountain top?"

"We'll find out soon enough, Maichu." Hyoushin mounted his horse, tightening his grip on the reins. "All right. Let's go. I wish to return to Touran by nightfall, so we have no time to lose."

As the mounted men rode through the village, the elder stepped back into his home, pausing at the window as he watched the group pass by. A thoughtful look glittered across his expression and his finger strayed to his cheek, brushing against his own slave scar.

"Well well." He murmured. "A Meihi from the East, with the crest

of the Emperor emblazoned on his belt. Yet the scars of his past rest deeply within that young man's heart… I wonder. What is the East like, these days? In what sort of a world has a Meihi put his faith behind the throne — is it time, finally, for an Emperor to bring the people of Kutou together in peace? These territories are harsh, yet I doubt we will ever trust enough as a people to return to the fertile Eastern lands."

"What do you think, Father?" A woman's voice startled him and he turned, watching his companion limp carefully across the room towards him as she rested her hand on his shoulder for support. "Men truly from the East — there are Meihi there who… who survived?"

"He was a slave once, but no more." The elder nodded his head. "A man who bore the Imperial crest of Kutou, and gave a Kutou name, not a Meihi one… a man who bears loyalty and debt to a man of the East — maybe things are finally beginning to change."

"But…" The woman bit her lip, her gaze flitting to the window as she watched the procession disappear towards the mountain. "Tell me about him, Father. His visage… his bearing. What sort of a man was he? A slave… who survived? Tell me, Father… who was he?"

"He gave his name simply as 'Hyoushin'." The elder spread his hands, shrugging his shoulders. "I know your thoughts, Lirayi, but you have to realise how desperate they are. True, he was a man of about the right age, but it means nothing, even if he was. There were many, many slaves in Kutou. Many, many Meihi who died at the hands of cruel masters — many people like you or I, who sought to escape. Not all were lucky… not all made it out. Even though you've not been able to know for sure… you have to put your heart at rest. The chances… are remote. And you pain me, constantly thinking in this way."

The woman sighed, shaking her head.

"I lost my whole family." She whispered. "And the things they made me do made me long for death more than life for so long, Father. To escape from their bonds, my leg was damaged beyond repair, and my left eye sees little beyond hazes and light. My cheek still bears their scar, and my memory still holds wounds that run yet deeper. And yet… the one thing that kept me living, was… was the thought that maybe… maybe I wasn't alone. Maybe… even though I saw my father brought down, even though I saw my mother's throat slit… even despite that, that there might be a chance… that Lilaihi…"

She faltered, tears touching her cheeks, and the elder sighed, reaching up to brush away the tears that had begun to fall.

“You must not.” He said softly. “You cannot. Lirayi, you have freedom and life. Embrace it. Your brother’s life is not assured… but your own is. Be glad for that, and come to terms with the things that you cannot change.”

“I wish I could.” Lirayi turned her face towards him, something glittering in her battered, clouded left eye. “Even though I know you are right. Lilaihi probably lies in a grave somewhere, unmarked and unmourned, just as my parents and my other brother all do. I should give up — but I can’t. Because while I have hope, I can keep finding the energy to live, Father. Lilaihi swore he’d protect me — he swore he always would, no matter what. And I believe… I believe he will… one day… come back for me. Just like he said he would… I *believe*.”

“Lirayi.” The elder shook his head slowly, but said no more, knowing that no matter what words he chose, he would not change her mind.

His thoughts flitted back to the young man in Kutou’s clothing, and he pursed his lips, considering.

“Hyoushin.” He murmured, more to himself than to his companion. “Whatever you seek to do in Kutou, I wish you luck. It is a cursed land… a forbidden land, forsaken by even the Azure Dragon that seeks to protect it. So many crimes have been committed there that even the Divine refuse to save it… can the heart of one scarred Meihi make such a difference? Your blood debt to your saviour — will you let it drive you to death, or will, in the end, you use it to bring Kutou to life? I wonder… what the power of one man truly is.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Seven

Well, there it was.

Chichiri raised his gaze to the first glimmers of morning light, pressing his hands together in an almost absent-minded prayer as, in the web of people and sensations, his consciousness brushed briefly and faintly against that of the young girl from the other world.

“Hikari-chan.” He murmured, getting slowly to his feet as he remembered his promise to his travelling companions. “So that’s where you are. To the west of here… is it a coincidence?”

“Chichiri?”

As if somehow he had heard his companion’s musings, the door of the chamber flew open at that moment to reveal the bandit Kashira, a questioning, expectant look crossing his lupine features as he met the sorcerer’s scarred gaze.

Slowly Chichiri nodded.

“I think I know where she is, you know.” He acknowledged the unspoken question that hung between them, and relief flickered in Tasuki’s bronze eyes.

“It’s about damn time!” He exclaimed. “What the hell took so long — you’ve been at it all night!”

“I know.” Chichiri admitted, stifling a yawn as he nodded his head. “It was a bit more tricky than I thought at first, and I’m more tired than I anticipated. This is my second night in a row without sleep, and it’s catching up with me — but I’m pretty sure now, you know.”

“Then we should go.” Tasuki said frankly, and Chichiri pursed his lips.

“Jin and Shishi?” He asked hesitantly. Tasuki’s eyes narrowed.

“You think they should stay here? Or come with us?”

“We don’t have much choice.” Chichiri sighed heavily, pressing his fingers together as he ruminated on the problem. “Hikari’s travelled quite far, you know… further than a quick walk in any direction. We’ve only just brushed past the Hokkan border, but she’s travelled a

good way west. In fact, she's gone… somewhere I think we need to go. That's part of why it took me so long, I think — I had to be sure. There's something very strong almost blocking the signal… and hers is not the only life force in the area that is familiar to me."

"Meaning what, exactly?" Tasuki demanded. "Quit talkin' in riddles, will you, an' tell me what you're tryin' to say? That somethin's preventing you from reaching Hikari's chi? Or some*one*?"

"Something." Chichiri pursed his lips. "I think… I think it's the Shinzahou, you know. And I can reach her. It just… made it difficult to pin her down exactly. As it is, I don't think I can transport us right on top of where she is, you know… but I think it's a village — at least, it feels like a village. A village on the Western border, not far from Sairou."

"From Sair…" Tasuki faltered, as realisation dawned in his bronze eyes, and Chichiri nodded.

"Yes." He murmured softly. "I think Hikari's found Amiboshi's village, Tasuki. And Seiryuu no Shinzahou."

"That's convenient." Tasuki groaned, rubbing his temples. "What the hell did she go and do that for, on her own?!"

"I don't think it was on purpose." Chichiri reflected. "From what she's said about the other times she's seen a red light around her, I think that when she's really upset something happens with the power that's sealed inside of her. It's almost like, when her emotions are really heightened, it pierces through the seal somehow… and releases a burst of energy that she can't control. The fighting with Shishi probably triggered it this time — but I'm wondering if it's also something more than that. That as Suzaku no Shinzahou, maybe she felt a connection with the Seiryuu treasure. Like she felt one with you and I, and came back to a place we could protect her. After all, we're a lot closer to where it is now than we were in Kounan… close enough for her to subconsciously pick up its vibe. I don't believe in coincidence — not where divine magic is concerned. Hikari probably had no idea what was happening — but Suzaku's power drew her to find the Seiryuu Shinzahou. In itself, that's quite a talent — if only she was able to control it. As it is, she can't to do that yet."

"So you mean she's right in the middle of some village where a homicidal ghost and an amnesic flute player from Kutou are hidin' out?" Tasuki sighed heavily. "Great. An' that we have to take Jin an' the cub if we're goin', because it's too far for us to come back?"

"Well, we could come back this way, but it would be a long walk

and there are quicker routes." Chichiri said ruefully. "I'm pretty tired, to be honest with you. I think I can take us one way — all of us — but if we have to face Suboshi, I'm not sure about two. Our best bet is to get to the village and find Hikari — and hope to reason with Amiboshi. Maybe if we can do that — make him see why we need it — he'll be able to manage his brother somehow. I don't think Suboshi would hurt Amiboshi, so I'm sort of counting on that."

"And Hikari?"

"Right now, she's alive and safe, somewhere within this village to the west." Chichiri assured him. "She's come to no harm so far, so we're not too late. Wake Shishi and Jin, Tasuki… and I'll get ready to transfer us. Even though that's the case, we can't guarantee that she won't be found by Suboshi or that she won't wind up in some other kind of trouble."

He sighed.

"Besides, the girl is scared and stranded here, and I feel sort of responsible for her, you know?" He added absently. "Because she's staying to help Mei-chan and Eiju as much as she is anything else. I did give her my word I'd protect her — that we both would. So we better make sure we keep it."

"You don't need to tell me twice." Tasuki said brusquely. "At least if the brat's got herself to the place we need to be, we aren't losing any time. Make sure you're ready quickly, Chichiri. I'll make sure Shishi an' Jin understand what we're doing… although when it comes to it, I want to keep them both out of any fightin'."

"Me too." Chichiri reflected. "And Hikari too. So we'll find her first, and then worry about the Shinzahou. Okay?"

"Okay." Tasuki nodded his head. "Let's hope its as simple as that sounds!"

———

Daylight.

Hikari pulled her robe more tightly around her body, descending the steps cautiously as she made her way down towards the main room of the Bu family home. A pleasant smell of fish mingled with the faint smoke of a wood fire drifted up to her as she pushed open the door, realising that despite her adventures the night before she was more than a little bit hungry. As she stepped hesitantly into the chamber, she realised that her host was already around, and plates waited on the table as he cast her a smile.

“I thought you’d be up soon.” He said softly. “Take a seat, Hikari-san. Touka’s taken the children to the market, and I haven’t forgotten my promise to help you find your friends. But I do want to talk to you, also. About last night.”

“Last night.” Hikari echoed, doing as she was bidden and scooping up her chopsticks as she glanced up at her companion. “Yeah. Me too.”

“Did you sleep all right, in the end?”

“Not too badly.” Hikari admitted. “Considering.”

“Mm.” Koutaku pursed his lips, then shrugged, taking a seat opposite her. “Hikari-san, last night you saw both Shunkaku’s spirit and the glow from the barn. I don’t understand how that’s possible… noone else can, not even my children. They’ve never known their uncle and it’s been difficult for Shunkaku to accept — that his nephew and nieces run around this farm, growing and laughing and playing and he’s never been able to make himself seen by any of them. But you… for no apparent reason, you saw him straight away. I need to know… why.”

“Like I know.” Hikari sighed. “I’d have been happier not. He might be fond of you, Koutaku-san, but he looked at me like I was some kind of devil. I was really afraid he might hurt me, if you hadn’t have sent him away. He had a weird glint in his eyes… I didn’t like it.”

“Shunkaku…” Koutaku’s expression became troubled, and slowly he shook his head.

“No, I don’t think he would have.” He said slowly. “I mean, this is my home… in front of my children, my wife… I’d like to think that he wouldn’t, even if he took a dislike to a guest. But my brother…”

He faltered, and Hikari felt a faint flicker of unease creep up her spine.

“So what was that blue light?” She asked softly. “If it wasn’t Shunkaku — what was it?”

“Something that I wish was miles from this farm.” Koutaku admitted. “Because I’m afraid that it will bring people here… people who might seek to cause trouble. Its a memento from a life long since left behind — a life that tainted both Shunkaku and I irrevocably, in the past. I don’t want it here, but I’ve had no choice in the matter.”

“I don’t understand.”

“No… I don’t suppose you do.” Koutaku reflected. “You’re too

young to remember the war, after all."

"War?" Hikari looked startled, pausing with her chopsticks part-way to her lips as she registered his words. "But I thought the North was peaceful — there's not been any wars here for a long time — has there?"

"This village was attacked once, in my memory." Koutaku admitted. "But no, as a rule, Hokkan is at peace. But that wasn't what I meant. Shunkaku and I — and Touka, for that matter — none of us are from Hokkan originally. We were born in Kutou, to the east — a country which never seems to tire of ripping itself to shreds over the least excuse."

"Kutou." Hikari breathed, and Koutaku nodded.

"But this farm… didn't you say your father left it to you?"

"He left it to a boy he called Kaika." Koutaku said with a rueful shrug. "Which, in the end, I came to be. It's a little complicated, to be honest. Shunkaku and I were orphaned by Kutou's civil war, and I was adopted by the family here later on. They called me Kaika, after their own son who had passed away — it's become something of a local nickname, because it was the name they wanted me to have. Most of my neighbours hereabouts still call me by that name, because they knew and loved the mother and father who took me in. And I loved them too, to be honest. I *wanted* to be Kaika — for a long time, I managed to forget about Kutou and the things that had happened there. But… when the blue light…"

He faltered.

"Between Shunkaku, my duty and Touka, it's been impossible to forget Bu Koutaku completely, and I'm definitely more him than I am Kaika these days." He reflected. "And I still remember war vividly enough to want to keep my children miles away from it. That's why this whole thing disturbs me. I need to know who you are, Hikari-san — and what power allows you to see what can't normally be seen by ordinary people?"

"Sukunami Hikari." Hikari said with a shrug. "I don't really know how else to answer that. I don't have any other names. I'm just Sukunami Hikari. That's all."

"But you're not from the North, are you?" Koutaku eyed her curiously. "You're far too susceptible to the northern cold — you don't look like you're from Hokkan. In fact, now I look at you closely, you remind me of something… but I can't place what or who. It might be

my imagination — it's hard sometimes to piece together the still fuzzy areas of my memory into something real and tangible. But looking at you there, I almost think I've met you before. Somehow."

"I don't think you have." Hikari said ruefully. "I've never been to Hokkan before this, and believe me, I'm not loving the experience. You've been kind to me, but I don't really like this country much at all. So far I've almost frozen, I've been separated from my companions and I've been scared half to death by a ghost. It couldn't get much less appealing."

Koutaku laughed, shaking his head slightly.

"No, I suppose not." He reflected. "The impression is still there, though. Of someone I knew a long time ago. Where are you from, Hikari-san? Maybe that will stir my memory… if you can tell me where you've travelled from."

"The south." Hikari looked startled. "I mean, I suppose I'm not really from…"

She faltered, remembering Chichiri's advice about concealing her true origins, and she frowned, shaking her head.

"The south." She repeated. "Kounan."

"Kounan." Koutaku's eyes widened, and Hikari could tell that something was sliding into place in his mind. He smiled, nodding his head.

"Then I believe your coming here cannot be a threat." He murmured. "I once spent time in your country, Hikari-san. I liked it very much — the people were kind and they forgave a young boy who was too scared and foolish to truly know what he was doing."

He got to his feet, moving to the window as he glanced out towards the stone hut.

"My brother was killed fighing for Kutou, in the war against Kounan." He said without turning around. "I did my best to persuade him otherwise, but he saw things so differently from me at the time. I think that maybe I ran away from my obligations, but I didn't want to fight. It was enough… the things I'd already been forced to do. I didn't want to fight against Kounan any more. Not when they'd told me that we were friends…"

"They?" Hikari looked confused, and Koutaku nodded.

"People who are long gone now." He reflected, and Hikari could hear the wistful note in his voice. "I regret so much that I couldn't

convince Shunkaku to come to Makan-mura with me… then maybe we would have grown up together. We were twins, and we were so connected — even when he died, I could feel it inside of me, as part of myself was ripped away forever. I wanted us to share in so many things which are now impossible. Instead, only I've grown up. He's trapped in the same state he was when he died — still stuck in his resentments and regrets, his emotions and convictions as wild and driven as they were then. I've moved on, but he can't. He's still there. I know my brother better than anyone, and I know — I've always known — that he's not evil. But war makes people do evil things. And my brother was slain before he could atone for the things that bastard Shougun made him do. Even now, I don't know if we entirely agree on this. But… if I could forget Kutou forever, sometimes… I think that I would."

"Shougun?" Hikari murmured. "Do you mean… *Nakago*?"

"You know about Nakago?" Koutaku turned, looking surprised, and Hikari nodded.

"I've heard a lot about him." She agreed. "Did he kill your brother too?"

"No… but he sent him to his death, in a strange world that Shunkaku couldn't possibly understand." Koutaku's voice was bitter. "A fifteen year old boy, who didn't understand his emotions and acted rashly on them. My brother… the twin brother I swore to my blood father I'd protect… in the end, I couldn't protect him from himself. But without Nakago pushing him, I know it wouldn't have happened."

Hikari's eyes widened, her chopsticks slipping from her grasp as a sudden realisation hit her.

"You… you…" She murmured, and Koutaku frowned, eying her keenly.

"Are you all right?" He asked, concerned. "You're not choking… do you need a drink of water?"

"No… no." Hikari gathered herself, staring at her companion as if seeing her for the first time. "It's just… you… you're *Amiboshi*… aren't you?"

At the sound of his Celestial name, Koutaku's face drained of all colour and he stared at her in disbelief.

"How on earth could you possibly know that?" He whispered. "I stopped going by that name before you were even born — who *are* you, Hikari-san?"

"You *are* Amiboshi." Hikari swallowed hard. "And that means… Shunkaku… is… *Suboshi*? Before and beyond the grave… Taiitsukun said…"

"*Taiitsukun*?" Amiboshi's eyes flashed with faint recognition. "But…"

"Then the blue light… is Seiryuu's Shinzahou?" Hikari hazarded. "That's what it is, that you wish was miles from your farm? *That's* what's hidden in the stone barn? Yui-san's holy treasure? The teardrop earring?"

Koutaku sat down heavily, staring at her in complete bewilderment.

"I don't understand." He murmured. "How do you know all these things?"

Hikari bit her lip.

"Because Chichiri and Tasuki told me so." She admitted. "And because we came north… to find… that Shinzahou. To see… you and… your brother. Only..I guess… I found you rather more quickly than we planned."

"Chichiri-san… Tasuki-san…" Koutaku's clever eyes flickered with remembrance. He pursed his lips, hesitating for a moment, then carefully he reached up to unbutton the collar of his shirt, pushing the fabric back until his right shoulder was exposed and Hikari let out a gasp, her hand flying to her mouth as she made out the glittering blue character burning against his skin.

"You really *are*." She murmured. "We came all this way… of all the farms in the whole of Hokkan, how did I end up here, on yours? Was it… *magic* that brought me here?"

She faltered for a moment, remembering for the first time since she had woken up in the snow that a red glow that had engulfed her during the fight with Shishi, and she swallowed hard.

"Are Shinzahou attracted to other Shinzahou?" She wondered inwardly. "Is that really the reason Chichiri and Tasuki brought me along — why Chichiri hesitated to use his sensing power, even when we had crossed the border? Is it because… I'm some kind of *radar*?"

At her expression, Koutaku nodded, re-fastening his clothing.

"Shunkaku bears his character on his other shoulder." He agreed. "I'd noticed that mine had started to shimmer again, when the light began in the barn… I had a feeling something was coming. But… was it *you*, Hikari-san? Was it *you* that made the Shinzahou glow, or

Seiryuu's power stirring somewhere in Kutou?"

"I don't know." Hikari admitted. "Really, truly, I don't know anything much at all and that's the truth. I just know that we have to find the Seiryuu Shinzahou before the Kutou Emperor does."

"Kounan and Kutou… are fighting another war?" Koutaku's brow creased in consternation and Hikari shook her head.

"No. It's not that." She replied. "But… Amiboshi-san, you said that Kutou was a country that fought a lot among its own people. Well, now the Emperor seeks the power of Seiryuu and the other Gods and… and if he gets it, then something terrible is going to happen to this world. And I… I don't know how or why, but I know we have to stop it. So Chichiri and Taiitsukun said that if we got the Shinzahou first, it wouldn't be able to happen."

She swallowed hard.

"I saw it — the future of this world." She whispered. "Everything was dead, including Chichiri's children… they were skeletons, Amiboshi-san… and… and if it happens, your children… you… your wife… everyone might end up that way too. So we have to stop it. That's why we came all the way here. I don't want to be involved in a war and I don't think we are, not yet. But I… I… I can't let that happen to Chichiri's children. They're so young and innocent — I just *can't*!"

She swallowed again, realising that tears had welled up in her dark eyes as she remembered the tiny, sleeping skeletons, and she pushed the image back, forcing herself to remain calm. Koutaku eyed her for a moment, and she could see a mixture of emotions flitting through his gaze. Then he sighed, rubbing his temples.

"So you came to take Yui-sama's Shinzahou to Kounan, so that it wouldn't end up in Kutou." He murmured. "And so long as it's here, my farm is a target. I left Kutou and their wars behind a long time ago, Hikari-san. And I trust in the word of someone who's a friend of Suzaku's Celestial Warriors. I was… almost one of them, at one point. I was sent as a spy to bring them down, but I grew to like them and respect them and in the end, my drive to protect Miaka-san was stronger than my desire to fight for Nakago and his twisted aims. If it was up to me, I'd give you the earring right away. I don't want it here, and if you speak the truth — if you taking it can prevent people suffering — then I'd rather you had it."

He hesitated, then,

“Please don’t call me Amiboshi.” He added. “I’ve left that life behind me now… I am no longer Seiryuu’s Celestial Warrior, even if this task has been conveyed upon me. When I chose to fight Tomo to defend Miaka-san’s life, then I turned against my Celestial identity. I am no longer Amiboshi. I am either Kaika — or I am Bu Koutaku.”

“I’m sorry.” Hikari bit her lip. “Koutaku-san, then. I didn’t realise, but I… I won’t do it again.”

“And Tasuki-san and Chichiri-san must be looking for you.” Apprehension flickered in Koutaku’s expression.. “But if they come here… Shunkaku…”

He faltered, and Hikari nodded her head.

“Chichiri and Taiitsukun both said that Suboshi loved people too much, and did rash things because of it.” She said slowly. “That to defend you, or to defend Yui-san — that because this is Yui-san’s treasure, he might not be willing to give it up. And that he… he hated Suzaku’s people. A… a whole lot.”

She glanced at her hands.

“Tamahome is… my father.” She admitted slowly. “And Miaka… Suzaku no Miko… my mother. Chichiri thought that if Suboshi met me, he’d be violent towards me, because of that. Because he hated my parents more than anyone.”

Consternation flared in Koutaku’s gaze, and he reached out a tentative hand to touch Hikari’s cheek, his eyes widened as he realised the truth in her words.

“Miaka-san and Tamahome-san were both kind to me, and friends to me even though I didn’t deserve them to be.” He murmured. “And *now* I see it — it’s *Miaka-san* I see in your face, when I look at you. But Shunkaku went to Miaka-san’s world… in order to try and bring them down. He felt that Tamahome-san had hurt me, somehow… and that both of them had hurt Yui-sama.”

“Do you think… will he try to… kill me?” Hikari asked fearfully.

“If you try to take the Shinzahou, I don’t know what he’ll do.” Koutaku admitted. “As you said, it was Yui-sama’s treasure. And my brother is still in love with Yui-sama… his death has meant it’s difficult for him to move on in any emotional regard. Whilst I was always more drawn to defend your mother — my brother… his devotion to the Priestess of Seiryuu was unmatched. In the end he gave his life for it… and I imagine that he would fight as hard as he could, if he thought that someone was trying to interfere in Seiryuu’s

work. It's something he feels that, even dead, even as a spirit, he can still do. Watch over my family, and watch over Yui-sama's sacred treasure. The two things that bind my brother to this earth."

He sighed, getting to his feet.

"You should leave here." He said softly. "And find your friends, before you try to come back. I meant what I said — that if it were just me, I'd give you the damn thing in a heartbeat — I hate it, and I think it's cursed, dragging Shunkaku's emotions out so much, and forcing potential danger on my family. But he feels differently, and I can't force him to relinquish it. I don't know what you're going to use it to do, and to be honest, I don't much care. For it to be away from here… I don't want the taint of Seiryuu's magic anywhere near my family, not now or ever again. War destroyed my childhood — I won't have it happen to my own children. But if you are… Tamahome-san's daughter, you… Shunkaku shouldn't learn about it while you're undefended. You're just a child, Hikari-san… even if you are a child of a Miko. It's not something you can do on your own."

"You think Shunkaku *will* hurt me." Hikari paled, and Koutaku sighed.

"I don't want to risk anything happening here." He hazarded at length. "Shunkaku's weapons are… Ryuuseisui… controlled by the power of his will. Even as a spirit, he's capable of wielding a fair amount of life force into them, and doing a considerable amount of damage. I know he would never lay a finger on me or my family — but yes, if he thought you were an enemy… I'm afraid that he might. Much as I love my brother… he's not the same boy I grew up with, at times. And I don't want you to be hurt, Hikari-san. I was very fond of your mother, once upon a time. And she was very kind to me, too. I'd like to repay that favour, if I possibly can at all."

"So you'll still help me find Tasuki and the others?" Hikari asked. Koutaku nodded.

"Yes." He agreed. "And I think it's something we should do as soon as possible."

Chapter 9

Chapter Eight

"So this is the village we've been looking for, huh?"

As the travellers recovered from the slightly bumpy landing, Tasuki glanced around him, surveying the small settlement with a thoughtful, almost predatory gaze. "This is the place where the Shinzahou's hidden? We could'a walked right past it and not even known it was here."

"If not for Hikari." Chichiri reflected, retrieving his hat as he nodded his head. "Yes, I'm pretty sure it is here. I can feel Hikari's chi — but not just her. I can feel both Amiboshi and Suboshi in this vicinity, too. Suboshi's has the taint of death — as we surmised, he's become a spirit to protect Yui's Shinzahou."

"From bandits like us, Chichiri-san?" Jin's fingers brushed the hilt of his blade, and Chichiri nodded.

"Yes, which is why I don't want you or Shishi going too much further." He responded. "At the first sight of danger, I want you — both of you — to get out of the way and find cover. Tasuki and I have fought Seiryuu's Seishi before, and I'm hopeful we'll be able to avoid or deflect any kind of confrontation. But on the off-chance that we can't…"

"I thought we were looking for Hikari first." Shishi objected, pulling her cloak more tightly around her as she cast her uncle a quizzical look. "Or is it okay now for her to be caught in the middle and Jin and I not?"

"I thought you'd done with the jealousy, kid." Tasuki shot her a pointed glance, and Shishi shook her head.

"I wasn't thinkin' that way." She said levelly. "Just, Hikari's a wimp an' she probably doesn't know one end of a sword from another. If there's a fight, she'll be killed… that's all. After all, you said we needed her — isn't our Shinzahou more important than Kutou's right at the moment?"

"Shishi is right." Chichiri pursed his lips. 'But to be honest, I don't think we can find one without the other. Hikari's energy is in that direction.' He pointed. "And so are the Seiryuu Seishi. So I think we'll

just… play it by ear, you know. Let's move on. If they haven't found her yet, then with any luck we can, before we arouse too many suspicions."

"Chichiri-san…" Jin hesitated, then nodded his head, casting the Seishi a questioning glance. "You've fought these guys before, yes?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Then they'll remember who you are, right?"

"Yes, I imagine so."

"But they don't know Shishi and they don't know me." Jin said evenly. "Cos we're not Seishi — we're just bandits, even if Shishi is the Kashira's cub. They probably don't have a clue about Hikari, either. I mean, it's like Shishi's said — she doesn't stand out as what she is. Her power's locked up and she can't fight — so they're probably not going to know she's a Shinzahou or that she's fighting for Suzaku — right?"

"Well…"

"So Jin and I should go and find Hikari." Shishi's eyes glittered with anticipation as she understood her companion's words. "And you and Kashira should go find the Shinzahou. That way, if these guys know you, they'll come looking for you. We'll be quite okay, and so will Hikari, because we'll take care of it. And they'll be too busy defending their treasure to worry about any of us. Right?"

"It could still be risky, you know." Chichiri looked doubtful. "I mean, we don't really know what we're dealing with, yet."

"But you don't want to be worrying about us and I refuse to hide in a barn like a baby while we could be doing something useful." Shishi objected. "Papa, what do you think? After all, these Seiryuu people will be more bothered by you than us… won't they?"

Tasuki frowned, the tip of a fanged tooth protruding over his bottom lip as he considered the situation carefully. At length he nodded.

"I think it's the best idea we got." He reflected, though from his expression it was clear that he had misgivings about allowing his daughter her way. "I mean, the kid has a point, Chichiri. They will worry about us, but they shouldn't care about them. And if we can lure the troublesome twins away from wherever it is Hikari's hidin' out, they can grab her an' get to the outskirts of the village, well away from any kind of action. We don't want to be worryin' about them or

bringin' them into a fight, after all. Even if it is still a risk, I think we gotta go with Jin an' Shishi's idea."

Chichiri pursed his lips, then shrugged.

"All right." He agreed cautiously. "Hikari's on a farm not far from here. In fact, I think it might be the next farm along. It's in close proximity to the place we're looking for, though… and I don't want to bring any innocent villagers into a conflict — so Tasuki, you and I'll tackle this from the other direction. I don't think that Seiryuu's Shinzahou is within a house — I think it's further afield, in someone's unused farm outbuilding. Which one is still foxing me somewhat. But that Suboshi's chi is right on top of it — that's something that's unmistakeable. So we'll head for there, and let the kids go to the farm and get Hikari."

"Right." Tasuki nodded, reaching up to pull his tessen from his back. "Good. It's cold out here — I'm sure I could use a good blaze."

The silver fan glittered ominously at his words, and despite himself, Chichiri chuckled.

"Just remember, Suboshi's a spirit, you know." He warned. "Fire won't work on him so easily as that."

"We'll see." Tasuki returned. "It was good enough for Hikou… and if he annoys me, dammit, I'll blast him anyway. Spirit or no spirit — I never liked that little brat."

"We'll meet up on the outskirts of the village." Chichiri said, casting Jin a smile. "If you have any trouble, though, focus all your thoughts on finding me… that goes for you too, Shishi-chan. If we can, we'll come and help — don't try and fight on your own. Understood? These aren't mountain bandits."

"Promise." Jin flicked his fingers in a mock-salute, nodding his head. "We'll be careful, Chichiri-san."

"You be careful too, Papa." Shishi instructed. "Okaasan won't forgive me if I let anything happen to you."

With that the two young bandits were gone across the grass, and Tasuki sent his companion a rueful glance.

"What does she imagine she'd do about it, if it did?" He wondered. "Am I protectin' her, Chichiri, or does the runt think she's protectin' me?"

"Like father, like daughter, or so they say." Chichiri laughed, patting his friend on the shoulder. "You should be proud of her for

that, you know."

"Guess so." Tasuki pursed his lips, shrugging his shoulders. "If it don't get her killed before she's grown enough to make use of it."

He turned, casting his gaze across the horizon.

"So we're going this way?"

"Yes." Chichiri agreed. "And we're going to go the quick way. Hang on tight, Tasuki-kun — I'd rather we'd engaged Suboshi's attention than risk him picking up on Hikari and the others."

"Right with you." Tasuki nodded grimly, grasping his friend's arm as the sorcerer muttered an incantation, tossing his hat up in the air over their heads as they were swept up into its dark depths. For a moment there was nothing but swirling blackness, then, as they exited the strange travel device, the two men found themselves facing a stone barn, gazing up at the walls with an identical look of recognition and determination on their faces.

"It's here." Chichiri murmured. Tasuki nodded.

"I can see the light." He agreed. "An' even I can feel that somethin' is in there. Which means we're goin' in there, doesn't it?"

"Right." Chichiri agreed, gripping more tightly onto his glittering *shakujou* as he returned his *kasa* to its travelling position. "Just be on your guard, you know. I think we're about to have company… and I don't think he's too pleased to see us."

Before Tasuki could respond, there was a swish of air as something brushed past the bandit's ear, and as he leapt back, raising his tessen with an exclamation, a figure hazed into view before them, glittering with blue light as he gazed at them through cold, angry eyes. Above his fingers, the spectral form of his Ryuuseisui whirled back towards his grasp, and as the apparition became more distinct, he glanced from one man to the other, his eyes slowly narrowing.

"Suzaku Shichi Seishi." He whispered.

"Well, there goes the surprise, you know." Chichiri sighed, even as he brought his fingers up before his face to form a barrier around both him and his companion. "I *told* you Suboshi was here."

"You do know that you're dead. Dead people aren't supposed to wander around farmland randomly attacking visitors." Tasuki eyed the spirit with dislike, and was rewarded with a look of equal venom from the young spectre as he seemed to be gearing up for a second attack.

“And *you’re* from Kounan. You don’t belong in Hokkan, or anywhere near Yui-sama’s Shinazahou!” He retorted hotly. “If you — *either* of you — take a single step closer, I’ll kill the *both* of you!”

“You’ll have to get past Chichiri’s barrier and my tessen first.” Tasuki snapped, as flickers of orange light glimmered around the edge of the silver fan once more.

“What do you think you can do to me?” Suboshi demanded. “As you said, I’m already dead. And my duty is to protect the Shinzahou — to protect it from scum like the both of *you*!”

He flexed his hands, as the ghostly white glow of the spectral weapon wheeled round for another attempt, and this time he cast it in Chichiri’s direction, his gesture flaring with blue energy as the ball-like implement battered against the sorcerer’s barrier. Chichiri muttered an incantation to repel the attack, but although the weapon was forced back, Suboshi’s aura seemed to glow with an even stronger azure light.

“Nice try, Chichiri.” He said mockingly. “I told you. All the spells in the world can’t cast me out of existance. Seiryuu left me here to guard Yui-sama’s Shinzahou… there’s no way you’ll ever be able to get past me.”

His eyes narrowed, and both men could see the flicker of pure hatred deep within his gaze.

“You can’t hold that barrier against me forever.” He added softly. “You’ll get tired, and lose your concentration, and then I’ll make you pay for coming here and daring to disturb my family! You’re not going to steal this Shinzahou — no matter what you do!”

“*Rekka Shin’en*!”

A flare of flame shot out from within Chichiri’s barrier, as Tasuki flexed his tessen in the spirit’s direction, but it blazed through Suboshi’s translucent body, scorching up the wall of the barn behind him as the spectre let out an amused laugh.

“You’re as stupid as ever, Tasuki.” He mocked. “You don’t realise you can’t burn a ghost?”

“I’m not aimin’ at you, you big mouthed brat.” Tasuki snapped back. “I don’t care about you, or your threats. We came for the Shinzahou an’ we’re damn well goin’ to take it, if it means blastin’ the barn to smithereens to find it. You’re jus’ in the way — you’re a nuisance, not a threat.”

“Tasuki, no.” Chichiri held up his free hand, shaking his head slowly as he did so. “No more fire. The land is damp from the snow, but we can’t risk damaging the Shinzahou by bringing the building down on top of it. Besides, we’re not here to fight — remember? We’re here for another reason… calm down and save your strength. I can hold the barrier for now — he can attack us, but he can’t hurt us, and we can leave anything else until we’ve had a chance to speak to Amiboshi. We’ve only got one of them so far… we need to find them both.”

Suboshi’s eyes flitted from one man to the other, a thoughtful look touching his features as he registered the look that passed between them. He frowned, flexing his fingers as the spectral weapon returned to his grasp, shimmering and then disappearing.

“You’re going to hurt my brother.” He murmured, anger in his eyes. “You’ll distract me, and hurt Aniki… and you think then you’ll be able to take the Shinzahou! Didn’t you learn once that I don’t tolerate anyone threatening my brother?”

“Aw, even after this long, the kid’s as nuts as ever.” Tasuki grimaced. “Shut your face, you stupid ghost… we’re not here to hurt anyone. We just want…”

“I don’t spend time talking with Suzaku’s lackeys.” Suboshi interrupted, and his aura blazed with blue light once more as he spread his hands, summoning the Ryuusuisei once more as they glimmered and shone with twice as much energy as before. Flexing his fingers, he cast his hand in the direction of the hapless Suzaku warriors, a glint of near madness in his eyes as he willed the weapons in their direction.

“I’ll kill you both before you lay a finger on Koutaku-nii or his family.” He hissed. “Prepare to die, Suzaku Seishi… you won’t get away this time!”

“Koutaku-san?”

As Hikari wrapped her cloak around her body, her companion stopped dead, a strange expression crossing his face as he did so. She frowned, hesitating also as she registered the sudden tension and alarm that ran through the farmer’s face.

“Koutaku-san, what’s the matter? Are you ill?” She demanded. “You’ve gone really pale — are you all right?”

“Shunkaku.” Koutaku did not seem to be listening to her, and he

darted forward, grabbing his flute from its resting place as he reached for the handle of the door, wrenching it back. “Dammit… Shunkaku, don’t do this!”

“Kou… taku-san?” Hikari eyed him uncertainly, and for the first time he seemed to hear her, turning to glance at her with troubled, clouded eyes.

“Stay here. Stay here and don’t come out!” He instructed. “I mean it, Hikari-san. You *must* stay here. Do you understand me? It’s not safe. I have to go somewhere — will you promise me to stay where you are?”

“But… I don’t…” Hikari faltered, and Koutaku grabbed her by the shoulders, meeting her startled gaze with an urgent one of his own.

“It’s not safe.” He repeated. “Will you trust me, Hikari-san? I know that you’re here for Kounan, and whatever I pretend to be, I’m still a man of Seiryuu by birth. But your parents were good to me and I won’t let harm come to you — will you stay here? I promise I’ll come back and I promise… will you do as I ask?”

Startled by the intensity in his eyes, Hikari nodded her head, and relief flickered in the farmer’s expression. He nodded, glancing at his flute as he seemed to make up his mind what he had to do.

“I’ll be right back.” He murmured. “Close the door, and don’t let anyone in. All right?”

With that he was gone, and a bewildered Hikari slowly closed the door behind him, her heart skipping a beat in her chest as she remembered the sudden change in her companion’s demeanour.

“He seemed frantic. Frightened. Like something was badly wrong.” She murmured, leaning up against the wood as she contemplated. “But what? Why did he take the flute… and what was he going to do with it? I don’t understand… all of a sudden…”

She froze, whitening as a sudden memory of something the farmer had said rang once more through her mind.

“You have to understand, Hikari-san, how close we were. Close enough that even our thoughts sometimes broke into one another’s minds without a word being spoken.”

“Shunkaku.” She whispered, and an involuntary shiver ran down her spine as she remembered the cold look in the spectre’s eyes as he had gazed down on her in the middle of the night. “Something… that’s what Koutaku-san said. His brother’s name, as if he knew…

Shunkaku… was doing something. Something… dangerous. Something…"

Her eyes widened.

"Chichiri and Tasuki?" She murmured, a cold dread knotting up inside of her as she pieced the puzzle together. "Chichiri did say that Suboshi hated Suzaku's people… and Koutaku-san also — he said that he didn't know what might happen, if we tried to take the Shinzahou. What if Chichiri and Tasuki came here to find me — and what if they're getting hurt because of me? What if that ghost *does* something to them?"

Before she knew what she was doing, she had yanked back the door of the farm, hurrying out into the cold snow as she struggled to work out which direction the farmer had gone.

"Hikari!" As she scanned the ground for the freshest tracks, a voice cut across her senses and she started, raising her gaze to meet the relieved dark eyes of Jin, the fiery-headed Shishi not far behind him. Her sense of foreboding grew as she hurried across to greet them, anxiety flickering in her expression as Jin held out his hands to her.

"Well, mission accomplished — you're all right." He said with a playful grin. "That was painless enough — I guess you're better at the survival thing than we gave you credit for."

"Tasuki and Chichiri!" Hikari gazed up at him, apprehension in her eyes. "Where are they? Jin, where are they?"

"They went to find the Shinzahou." It was Shishi that answered, casting the young schoolgirl a confused look. "We came to find you. Why?"

"Something's happening." Hikari's heart clenched in her throat and she turned towards the direction of the farm outbuildings, remembering only too clearly the blue glow that had shone out like a beacon in the darkness. "Suboshi… we have to go. We have to go there — we have to go now!"

"Woah, girl, what are you doing?" Jin demanded, as she grabbed him by the hand, dragging him across the snow towards the place she knew Seiryuu's holy treasure was hidden. "Kashira an' Chichiri-san told us we were to get you out of the village — we ain't to go after them! We gotta let them handle this themselves!"

"Suboshi's going to kill them." Hikari did not slow down, panic in her eyes as she shook her head. "For the Shinzahou, he's going to… he's going to hurt them!"

“Kashira can handle him — they both can!” Shishi objected. “Hikari, you idiot, are you wantin’ to get yourself hurt?”

“He’s going to kill Chichiri and Tasuki.” Hikari whispered, tears glittering in her eyes as a stifling wave of panic and distress overwhelmed her. “I can feel it… near the Shinzahou… Suboshi’s more powerful than Chichiri is. And he *hates* Suzaku. He hates anything to do with Suzaku. We have to stop it — we *have* to!”

“Hikari, get a grip on yourself!” Jin begged, as they drew closer to the barns, and he finally managed to get a firm grip on her, pulling her back and holding her tightly against his body as she fought against his grasp. “You’re getting hysterical, you silly idiot — what do you imagine *you* can do? Shishi’s right — Kashira ain’t no walkover, and Chichiri neither — he’s one hell of a sorcerer — you mightn’t know the legends but we do. No way this runt Seiryuu boy is stronger than he is… you’re going to get yourself into trouble!”

“Jin, I can *feel* it.” Hikari turned her gaze to his, sending him a beseeching look as she struggled to make him understand. “I don’t know how, but I can! Chichiri… Tasuki… I can feel it inside of me. Chichiri’s tired… I can’t explain it, but I’m not being silly!”

“Pipe down and listen to Jin, all right?” Shishi put a hand on her arm, and Hikari glared at her, expecting to see censure in her expression. Instead, however, Shishi’s gaze was deadly serious, and slowly the young bandit shook her head.

“Kashira’s gotta do what he gotta do.” She murmured. “If we go down there, then sure as heck someone will get killed. No way Kashira or Chichiri’d let anythin’ happen to you or to us, if they could prevent it. Right now, if we interfere in anything, we might make things worse.”

“But…”

“Shit, pay attention already, will you?” Shishi snapped. “You ain’t the only one worried about it — but stop freakin’ out like a baby, all right? Have some faith in them. There ain’t anything we can do, Hikari. Jus’ follow orders an’ leave the village. Chichiri an’ Kashira’ll be all right. But if you run into the fray, you’ll be the one ripped to shreds by this kid’s Ryuuseisui.”

“You don’t understand.” Hikari shook her head slowly, the fight draining out of her as she realised Jin’s grasp was too strong for her to escape. “I know what you’re saying, but you don’t… you don’t know…”

She faltered, not even understanding herself the feelings that were welling up inside of her, and Shishi sighed.

“Do you even know what Ryuuseisui are?” She asked softly, and Hikari shook her head again.

“Pray you don’t find out.” Jin said grimly. “Let’s leave it at that. Remember what Chichiri said — this brat ripped apart your father’s family, singlehandedly. You think Tamahome’d want his daughter goin’ the same way as his Pa an’ his siblings? Take a breath an’ calm down. We both understand how you feel, you know. We want to help too. But the only thing we can do… is get out of the way.”

“No… you don’t.” Hikari closed her eyes, fighting against her tears. ‘I can’t even explain it properly to myself, so how can I explain it to you? It’s not that I’m just scared… of course I’m scared, I’ve been damn well scared since I got dropped into this god-awful excuse for a world! But you don’t know… I can feel Chichiri, like he’s right here, fighting with all his strength. Whatever’s happening… I can feel his energy and I can tell that he’s in trouble. I know it doesn’t make any sense,’ As Shishi stared at her. “But it’s true. I can feel him… and he’s… getting weaker. He’s trying to fight something… and he *can’t do it alone*!”

“Shit… you’re serious, aren’t you?” Jin eyed her in consternation. “You can really do that? Sense auras an’ shit, like Chichiri-san can?”

Hikari shrugged her shoulders.

“I don’t know.” She said miserably. “I don’t know what it is. I just know I don’t like this feeling… It’s like he’s calling to Suzaku for help and somehow he got a wrong number and wound up hitting me instead. I don’t understand it — I just know it’s there. He’s tired, he’s fighting… but the Shinzahou is stronger. It’s making Suboshi stronger… they’re going to get hurt, Jin — we have to do *something*!”

Jin cast Shishi a glance, and determination crossed the young girl’s expression. Slowly she nodded her head.

“We’ll go.” She said quietly. “If Hikari’s so sure, well, maybe she’s wrong but maybe she ain’t. We ought to check it out… I ain’t goin’ back an’ telling Aniue or Okaasama or Aunt Aidou that they got killed in Hokkan, so… if there’s anything…”

“Kashira made me promise we wouldn’t fight anyone.” Jin said doubtfully.

“*You* promised. Hikari an’ me, we didn’t.” Shishi said firmly. “Come on. Do you really think we can stand back an’ do nothing if it’s really

as she says it is?"

Jin sighed, then slowly he shook his head.

"Guess not." He reflected. "All right. You win. We'll go after them. But we'll go carefully, all right? Swords ain't much use with ghosts an' if we don't have any other weapon but the element of surprise, we'd better damn well use it. Let's see what's going on before we do anything drastic… it might not be as bad as Hikari thinks."

"Then we shouldn't waste time." Shishi's hand went to her blade, and for the first time Hikari was faintly comforted by the hard resolution in the younger girl's gaze. "Hikari, you know where this thing is?"

Hikari nodded.

"I can feel it, too." She whispered. "I can see… last night, I could see it, glowing blue in the darkness, like a ghost. Koutaku-san — he told me that it was… the Shinzahou."

"Koutaku-san?"

"Amiboshi." Hikari swallowed hard. "This is his farm. He went after his brother… I think… to try and stop him. But I don't think he can… I don't know if he can. I don't even know what power he has, if he has a power at all any more. He's not a spirit like Suboshi — he can get hurt, too. And he saved me from the snow — he's been kind to me."

"Then if you know where we're going, you lead the way." Jin said quietly, new respect burning in his gaze. "I'm sure Kashira can handle it, Hikari, but we'll go see. Even if Kashira gets mad at us — desperate times call for desperate measures an' we ain't got any time to lose!"

"*Chichiri!*"

As Suboshi's weapon hit it's mark once again, Chichiri's barrier faltered, pushing him almost to his knees and he gritted his teeth, struggling to re-affirm its strength as he poured yet more of his magic into holding their defences. Sweat beaded his brow as he drew on the deepest of his inner resources, and out of the corner of his eye he was aware of Tasuki's concern, as the bandit shot him a sidelong glance.

"I told you." Suboshi's eyes narrowed. "You can't get past me. Yui-sama's Shinzahou belongs to my brother and I and I'm not letting you get any closer."

"Damn it, you brat, why do you always act first and talk later?"

Tasuki demanded, shifting himself in front of his friend as if somehow he could protect him from Suboshi's ruthless, relentless attacks, and Suboshi laughed, shaking his head slowly.

"I don't need to think where Suzaku's people are concerned." He said softly. "You shouldn't have come here. I don't know why you want this treasure, and I don't care. It doesn't belong to you. It's Seiryuu's, it's not yours. And you aren't going to steal it from this place. Do you understand that? You're not!"

"Shunkaku, no! *Stop* this!"

At that moment a fresh voice interrupted the ever-more heated confrontation and as he registered the newcomer's life force, Chichiri turned in surprise, meeting the alarmed gaze of the man who was, quite clearly, the owner of the farm property. Despite the disparity of ages, there was enough in the stranger's bearing and appearance to give away his relationship to the ghost, and at the sight of the flute in his hand, he bit his lip, hesitating as he wondered which way Amiboshi's loyalties would go.

"They came to steal it, Aniki." Suboshi, momentarily distracted, spread his hands, the Ryuuseisui faltering and dropping into nothing but spectral ash as he met his brother's gaze. Koutaku frowned, then he shook his head.

"Let them." He murmured, and Suboshi's eyes opened wide with disbelief.

"Aniki?"

"It causes nothing but pain. Let them." Koutaku shook his head. "I don't want fighting on my farm, Shunkaku. Not here, not where my family live. We're not in Kutou now. And so long as that wretched treasure stays here, you can't leave this place or move on. Let them take it, little brother… it's no good to either one of us."

"It's Yui-sama's treasure." Suboshi faltered, then he shook his head, resolution glittering in his ghostly eyes. "I can't, Aniki. You might not feel like one of Seiryuu's warriors any more, but it's different for me. We both made those choices… and I won't ever walk away from protecting anything Yui-sama left in this world. This is our duty — *both* of our duties."

Chichiri's gaze flitted between the brothers, and with a sigh he lowered his hands, dropping his barrier as he sensed the flickering uncertainty in both twins' life energy.

"Amiboshi." He murmured.

“Chichiri-san.” Amiboshi glanced at him, a troubled look in his eyes. “Tasuki-san. Have you really come to *steal* the Shinzahou? I thought men of Suzaku at least asked first… I didn’t expect…”

“We came to distract *that* little worm while we tracked down something a little more important to the both of us than jewellery.” Tasuki jabbed his tessen in the direction of the still fuming Suboshi, whose eyes narrowed at the blatant slight. “We were waitin’ for *you*, because we wanted an adult conversation an’ Suboshi here ain’t quite got out of teenage temper tantrum stage yet.”

“Do you *want* to be ripped to pieces, Tasuki?” Suboshi glowered in his direction, and Tasuki, forgetting for a moment that he was a father and the leader of a mountain gang pulled a graphic face in return.

“I’m not scared of you.” He snapped. “Quit talkin’ big an’ let the grown ups deal with this already.”

“Something more important?” Koutaku eyed Chichiri hesitantly, then, “Hikari-san?”

“That girl…” Suboshi’s eyes widened with surprise, then, “*She’s* part of this too? I knew she had something about her… Suzaku’s touch! She was from Kounan — I knew there was something wrong… Aniki, don’t you see that this is all a part of their plan? That girl, this, everything — to turn you against me and make you give up Yui-sama’s treasure! We have an obligation to Seiryuu and to our Priestess — don’t you care even a little bit about that?”

“If *you* care about Kutou, Suboshi, or about the things your Priestess came to protect, you should at least hear what we have to say.” Chichiri said quietly, holding his hands up to prevent Tasuki from responding. “We haven’t come to steal anything… like Tasuki said, we were hoping to attract your attention away from Hikari, because she’s no older than you were when *you* were killed, you know. And she’s not able to defend herself like you or we can… we wanted to make sure she was safe. After all, she’s the daughter of someone very precious to us — as precious to us as I’m sure Amiboshi’s children are to you.”

Suboshi’s eyes darkened, and the sorcerer realised that somehow he had hit a sore point. Inwardly he berated himself for his carelessness.

“Tactless as Tasuki when I’m tired.” He reflected ruefully. “Suboshi’s a ghost. His nephews and nieces can’t probably see him… I should have thought that through before I said anything at all.”

“Hikari said something about protecting your family, Chichiri-san.”

Koutaku said slowly. “About protecting… more than just that. That this whole world was in danger. Is that true?”

“Are you going to just believe their stories?” Suboshi demanded. “Aniki…”

“Shunkaku, please.” Anguish glittered in Koutaku’s clever eyes as he shook his head. “Please don’t make this any more difficult for me. I want to know what the situation is — please, let’s at least hear what they have to say.”

Chichiri inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement of the farmer’s words.

“We came to collect Yui-sama’s Shinzahou because in the wrong hands, it might be used for significant evil.” He said softly. “The war is over. Kounan is a peaceful country, and like any father, I want to keep it that way for my children to grow up never knowing the things that we had to face, eighteen years ago when your land and ours first clashed swords. We don’t seek to use it to raise Suzaku, or even to harness its magic in any way, shape or form. But to prevent it from falling into hands that might use it destructively. Hands which may cause the deaths of not just Kounan’s children — but *all* children. All *people* — everywhere. In all of the four lands, and beyond their borders, too. That’s why we’ve travelled so far north, and why we’ve come to your farm, Amiboshi. That’s why we want the Shinzahou. To ensure that my children — and your children — can grow up with peace that you and I were *both* born to ensure.”

Koutaku’s eyes widened, and slowly he nodded his head.

“Hikari-san said something very similar.” he admitted. “And I… I have faith in your word, even if Shunkaku does not. Little brother, I believe them. And I want that thing away from this place. If evil hands seek it out, then my family’s farm is a target… I don’t want that.”

Suboshi was silent for a moment. Then he brought his hands together, the spectral orbs hovering above his fingers as he gazed at the Suzaku warriors thoughtfully.

“My brother might believe you, but I don’t see why I should.” He said softly. “You’ve offered no proof that you’re here on that errand… no proof at all.”

“Yes, they have!” At the sound of Hikari’s voice, Chichiri’s heart sank in his chest and he turned, seeing the young girl running across the snow, hair flying out behind her as Jin and Shishi struggled to reach her and pull her back. She evaded their attempts, however, a

wild, strange look in her eyes as she neatly put herself between Suboshi and the startled, dismayed Suzaku warriors. "*I'm* the proof, Shunkaku-san. I'm the proof that you need!"

"You." Suboshi glared at her angrily. "If I'd have known who you were last night…"

"Would you have killed me, in the house where your brother lives with his family?" Hikari demanded, and Chichiri stared, almost sure he could see something red flickering in her aura as she stood before him, eying him bravely. "My father was Tamahome. My mother was Suzaku no Miko. I come from the other world — the one *you* died in, trying to kill my parents. And Kounan don't *need* your stupid Shinzahou to make their bird come back to life. They *have* a Shinzahou already."

She put her hands on her hips.

"Koutaku-san said that you loved Yui-san." She said accusingly. "But if you really did, you wouldn't behave like this!"

"Tamahome and Suzaku no…" Suboshi's eyes widened, and a flicker of rage flared in them as he cast his hands out, sending the ghostly Ryuuseisui spinning in her direction. "And you have the nerve to come here, demanding these things from us? I couldn't kill your parents, but dammit, I won't miss you!"

"Hikari-chan!" Chichiri's tired body jerked into life as he fought to erect a barrier between his charge and the angry Seiryuu Seishi, but Suboshi flexed a hand in his direction, the force of the weapon's energy sending him flying backwards instead. He fell to the ground with a thud, wincing as pain jarred through his body even as he heard Tasuki yell his name.

"*You* both keep out of this." Suboshi snapped. "This is an old score I have to settle."

"Shunkaku, stop this!" Koutaku's grip tightened around his flute, anguish and uncertainty in his gaze and as Chichiri struggled to sit up, he realised that the flautist was trying to decide whether to fight his brother or not. Tasuki's tessen was already flaming, anger in his gaze and try as he might, Chichiri could not raise a flicker of a spell inside of him to protect his impetuous friend.

"Shishi, Jin! Get back!" He exclaimed, as he realised how close the two young bandits had gotten, and that in all likelihood neither one of them would be able to see the threat that hovered ominously in front of them. "Get back to the farm — get away from here!"

“But Chichiri-san…”

“Do it, now!” Tasuki snapped. “Jin, you gave me your word — do as you’re told!”

His command snapped out across the winter landscape and Jin swallowed hard, then nodded his head, grabbing Shishi by the arm and pulling her back towards the main farm building, out of the line of fire. Hikari dropped down at Chichiri’s side, holding out a tentative hand to him, and he bit his lip, grabbing her tightly around the wrists.

“You silly girl, are you *trying* to get killed?” He asked softly, but even as he asked the question, he saw the unearthly, intense look in her dark eyes and as she shook her head, he glanced up, seeing Suboshi preparing for another assault.

“Hikari-chan, get down!” He exclaimed. “I can’t project a barrier — get *down*!”

Hikari did not seem to be fully listening, however, for she turned, getting to her feet and meeting Suboshi’s gaze head on. She held out her hands, as if trying to bar the Seiryuu Seishi’s line of fire.

“You’re a real idiot.” She said pragmatically. “You say you love Yui-san, but if you did, you wouldn’t try to hurt me. Yui-san and my mother have been best friends since before I was born. She held me the day I was born… she’s almost like another Aunt to me, and if you killed me, do you think she’d ever forgive you? I don’t think so. You’re stuck in some weird fantasy world — and for a dude who exists in a book, that’s something of an achievement in itself! If you think that killing me — or Chichiri, or anyone — is what Yui-san would want, you’re crazy. She’s a kind person — she has a *good* heart. She would never, *ever* like anyone who could shed blood so easily!”

At her words, Suboshi looked stricken, as if, for the first time, something had penetrated through his fierce, defensive anger. His weapons faded once more, as he stared at the young girl and now Chichiri was quite sure that he could feel Suzaku’s presence prickling against her aura.

“And if you love your brother so much, why do you want him and everyone else to die, huh?” Hikari had not finished, her expression both self-righteous and indignant, though Chichiri had the distinct impression that she was not entirely aware of her actions or of the things she was saying. “You must be really, *really* stupid. If *we* don’t take the earring, someone else will come and they might just burn the farm down, or whatever — I don’t know, but I know there are some people in this world who are pretty sick in the head. And if *they* get

this stupid treasure of yours, well, it won't matter what you do or what you don't do. Everyone in this world is going to die. I've seen it. I've *seen* it! And if that's what you want, you're obviously a really, truly, completely stupid idiot!"

As she finished her heated speech, a faint crimson glow surrounded her body for the briefest of instants, and if it had been possible for Suboshi's face to drain of colour, his would have done so. Koutaku was looking equally stunned, staring at the young girl as if unable to believe his eyes.

"Hikari-san." He murmured. "Who… what… *are* you?"

"Suzaku no Shinzahou." Chichiri said softly. "She's drawn to your treasure just as you are… and just as we are to her. Suboshi, if you won't believe me, will you believe Suzaku's vessel, when she stands before you and tells you this world's future? Your life is over. Your brother's is not. Will you willingly consign him and his family to death, just to protect an earring which signifies nothing but pain and war anyway? Or have you forgotten all the people who lost their lives in the pursuit of summoning Seiryuu?"

"We both know something is in the air, little brother." Now Koutaku took a hand, taking a step towards his younger brother as he did so. "Shunkaku, can we really risk not believing what they say? I trust these people — they were kind to me, and continued to be kind to me even when they knew I was one of Seiryuu's chosen. And besides…"

He frowned, biting his lip.

"If we let the Shinzahou go, you can rest, and find peace, too." He murmured. "I hate how much you still suffer, Shunkaku — without that earring… maybe you can find a new start, and live a new life, free of this pain."

At this, Suboshi's harsh expression softened, and tears glittered in the depths of his eyes. Slowly he shook his head.

"I won't go anywhere so long as you're here, Aniki." He said quietly. "When we go, we'll go together. I won't let us be separated again."

"But Yui-sama's treasure… I want to let them take it." Koutaku said evenly. "I don't want to fight you — you're the one person I can't fight, no matter what you do. But Shunkaku, I don't want it here any more. I don't want more children suffering how we did. It's like Chichiri-san said. The war is over. We have to let it go and move on.

Both of us. It's time to let Seiryuu take care of himself."

There was a long silence, as Suboshi seemed to be fighting this out with himself. Then, at length, he sighed, dropping his gaze as his azure aura faded to nothing.

"All right." He murmured reluctantly. "If that's what you want, Aniki… I… won't fight… any more."

"Suboshi?" Tasuki eyed him warily, and the spectre offered a sad, bitter smile.

"I don't like that it's you who're taking it from here." He said softly. "But I won't fight my brother, or spill blood on his family's farm. If it's true… what you say… I have other things to protect as well as Yui-sama's earring. Maybe she'd understand… if she knew… it was for the sake of Koutaku-nii's family."

"You *believe* me?" Hikari stared at him, and slowly, Suboshi nodded his head.

"I despise what you are, but I believe what you say." He said frankly. "I won't have any more to do with this, though. Aniki, if it's what you want, *you* give them the treasure. I won't be part of giving it into Kounan hands."

With that, he faded and glittered out of view, and if the energy had drained out of her, Hikari stumbled, dropping to the ground as she raised a hand to her head.

"Hikari!" Chichiri was immediately alert, shifting his own tired, aching body as he reached out an arm to support her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm… tired." Hikari murmured. "I don't know… what came over me. Something… was inside of me… and it wanted… to come out."

She stared at him, her eyes widened as she registered what had happened.

"Did I just face down that crazy ghost?" She demanded. "Am I *completely* insane? He might have killed me… what the hell was I *thinking*?"

"You were thinking of protecting Kounan." Chichiri grinned at her, patting her playfully on the back. "And me, Hikari-chan. I think you were also trying to protect me."

"You really *are* Suzaku's Shinzahou." Shishi's voice alerted them to the fact that though the bandits had withdrawn, they had not gone

very far, and Chichiri eyed her reprovingly.

"*You're* meant to be somewhere safe." He scolded her. "Tasuki-kun, I think you've failed somewhere in teaching this one to follow instructions."

Tasuki offered his friend a rueful grimace and Chichiri saw colour flush Shishi's cheeks.

"Is Hikari all right?" Jin looked anxious, and Chichiri nodded.

"I think so. Just tired and a bit shell-shocked by what she's done." He agreed. "We both need to catch our breath a little, that's all. It's cold out here, you know."

"Will you really let us take the Shinzahou now?" Tasuki cast Koutaku a questioning look, and the farmer nodded his head.

"Shunkaku has agreed, and I will be glad to see it go." He said simply.

"Then you go with Amiboshi and retrieve it, Tasuki." Chichiri suggested. "I'll play babysitter this time, and make sure noone does anything they're not supposed to do."

"Hey, it ain't easy keepin' control of girls when they're determined to do somethin'" Jin objected, reaching out a hand to haul Hikari to her feet. "You're shakin', you stupid girl — you must be freezin'! Here…"

He slipped off his jacket, handing it to her, and clumsily she accepted it, shooting him a faint smile as she pulled it around her shoulders. "Yeesh… maybe you are nuts."

"But not as much of a wimp as I thought you were." Shishi admitted grudgingly. "I couldn't see what was attacking you, Hiki, but I heard you yellin' at it and I heard you defendin' Chichiri. So I guess… I take it back. You *are* Suzaku's Shinzahou… I guess there's more to you than I thought."

"Hiki?" Hikari eyed the younger girl in confusion, and Shishi shrugged.

"Seemed right." She said nonchalantly. "Why, you gonna yell at me about that now, too?"

Hikari looked startled, then a faint smile touched her lips, and Chichiri pulled himself to his feet, glancing between the two girls with some amusement.

"Guess not." Hikari said at length.

“S’pose this means we have a truce, then?”

“I… suppose so.” Hikari hesitated, then she nodded her head.

Shishi held out her hand, taking the other girl’s in her’s and shaking it self-consciously.

“There. Sealed.” She said brusquely. “And… I’m sorry… I said that stuff. Before. ‘Bout your parents, an’ you not carin’ and shit. I didn’t really believe you were… but now I do. You ain’t what I thought… an’ I’m sorry.”

Hikari’s eyes widened at this, then a proper smile touched her lips.

“Then I’m sorry too.” She admitted. “I have… I suppose… I was moaning a lot. I just… really don’t fit into this world. And till this… till now… I felt I was completely useless being here, too.”

“Well, you’ve proved you’re not that, you know.” Chichiri rested his hand on her shoulder. “If you hadn’t intervened, he might well have hurt me — or killed me. You said you’d stay to help my family, but I didn’t realise it extended to me too, Hikari-chan.”

Hikari dimpled, and Chichiri was encouraged to see the flicker of pleasure light up her hazel eyes. She nodded.

“I think Mother and Father’d want me to have done it. If that’s why they made me be this Shinzahou thing, after all.” She said thoughtfully.

“Well, now we’ve got what we came for, I guess we can go home?” Jin asked. “Are we walking or flying in the hat, Chichiri-san?”

“My power is completely drained.” Chichiri shook his head. “It’s probably not a good idea for us to linger in Makan, or in Hokkan for too much longer just in case there are people from Kutou already on the way North to find this earring of Yui’s. But I’m afraid we’re walking. At least, so long as Hikari can manage to walk — I know that yesterday she found it a trial and after this morning…”

“It’s all right, Chichiri. Jin an’ me, we’ll see to her.” Shishi said frankly. “Besides, you look about to fall down yourself, you know. Did you really blast yourself out?”

“Yes, but I’ll be all right, once I’ve had a little rest.” Chichiri’s good eye twinkled at his niece’s blunt concern. “We’ll head towards the border, and maybe find somewhere to have a good meal and rest for a while, so both Hikari and I can catch our second wind. Then we’ll head back towards Kounan. It might take a day or two for my power to restore enough to transfer us to Eiyou or the mountain, but there’s

no harm in using our legs — it's why we have them, after all!"

"And then Hiki can go home?" Shishi questioned. Chichiri frowned, as Hikari sent him a quizzical look.

"Can I?" She asked hesitantly. "I mean… is it enough… to just have Seiryuu's Shinzahou? Taiitsukun said…" She faltered, biting her lip as she considered.

"I suppose we'll find out." Chichiri admitted. "For now lets worry about getting back to safe and warmer territory, and finding somewhere secure for the earring. Then, Hikari-chan, we'll think about sending you back to your world. After all, Taiitsukun did say they needed the power of *all* the Shinzahou to achieve this devastation. And so it might, in the long run, be better to send you back…"

He frowned, rubbing his chin.

"We'll discuss it when we get back to the South." He decided.

"So what are we waiting for? Let's go already!" At that moment Tasuki re-emerged from the building, Koutaku in tow, and Chichiri's heart flickered with relief as he registered the small black box in his companion's grip. He nodded, bowing his head towards Koutaku in acknowledgement.

"You have my word that we won't use it to cause anyone harm." He said softly, and Koutaku smiled, shaking his head.

"My brother might not believe in you, but I do." He said simply. "I think it's probably safer with you than with me, anyway. I've never been a very good servant to Seiryuu, after all."

He glanced at Hikari, who offered him a grin.

"Take care of your own, too." He added softly. "Hikari-san, I'm glad to have met you. When you see your parents next, tell them that I wish them well. They always did belong together… more than any couple I have ever met. And I'm glad that, somehow, they achieved their miracle and made it happen."

"I… I will." Hikari nodded her head. "I promise. And I'll tell them that you saved me from freezing too, Koutaku-san. I… I know they'll be glad, when I tell them that."

Koutaku offered a rueful smile.

"It was the least I could do, in the end, considering you're Miaka-san's daughter." He reflected. "Have a safe journey back to the south,

all of you. With any luck, the blizzard has passed and won't return for a few hours at least… make the most of the time while you can."

"That's what we're going to do." Chichiri agreed, holding out his hand to take the treasure from Tasuki, slipping it into the folds of his clothing as he nodded his head. "All right, kids, Tasuki… let's get moving, you know!"

Chapter 10

Chapter Nine

“Well, now I know how glad I am we don’t do much mountain climbing in training.”

As they reached the summit of Koku-zan, Maichu shivered violently, gazing around him with dislike at the snow that covered every visible surface. “And why do they call this the Black Mountain anyway? It looks pretty friggin’ white to me — are they having some kind of a joke with us or what?”

“I imagine it’s because the stone that lies beneath the stone is ebony in colour, Maichu.” Hyoushin reflected, and his soldier reddened, having not realised his Commander was so close behind him. “Either way, such things are immaterial. We are not here to discuss the view — or the nature of the rocks that form such a peak. We are looking for the place in which Genbu no Miko’s Shinzahou was once enshrined. This is, I believe, the location where Ashitare lost his life to obtain the treasure.”

“It must have been horrible.” Aoiketsu reflected absently. “To die on a peak such as this one. To have the last thing you see be frozen ice and snow and nothing else for miles. To die all alone in a place like this… Hyoushin-sama, is that truly what happened to Ashitare?”

“Well, someone else must have been here at one point.” Hyoushin observed. “Since the Genbu Shinzahou was conveyed from this place. Seiryuu was raised over Sairou’s skies, was he not?”

“Then someone else was here too?” The soldier known as Kayu frowned. “And he what — stabbed Ashitare in the back and ran off to the Shougun with the holy treasure?”

“What exactly happened on this mountain, only those who were here know for sure.” Hyoushin admitted. “All I know is that this is where Genbu no Shinzahou was concealed, and it was here Ashitare came to claim it. Lord Kikei’s sources claim he died away from the mountain — that he was slain in the valley below, by some unknown force. Perhaps this is true, although the stories of some of the local residents have indicated otherwise. But that the treasure was kept here once, this seems beyond dispute.”

“I found something, Commander.” Maichu gestured across the

landscape to where a rock solid mound of frozen earth rose out of the land. At first glance, it seemed like just another stretch of uneven terrain, but in the midst of this mound was a sturdy piece of wood — a branch from one of the pine trees that had flanked the lower ledges and which had been carefully stripped of all needles before being thrust into the earth.

"What the hell?" Kayu looked bewildered. "How did *that* get there?"

"Someone evidently put it there." Hyoushin said frankly. "Although it can't have been there long… the elements would soon have beaten it down."

"So we should investigate it, sir?" Aoiketsu sent his Commander a questioning glance.

"It looks like a twig in the earth to me." Maichu snorted, reaching out to tap it with his hand, but as he did so, a red flicker of light flared out around the mound, pushing him back as it flared into a ghostly crimson barrier. With an exclamation, Maichu tumbled to the floor, and Aoiketsu hurried to haul his friend up, staring with uncertainty and disbelief at the strange, glimmering light. In a moment, the glare had faded to nothing once more, and Maichu bit his lip, gazing up at his fellow soldier in confusion.

"What the hell was that?" He whispered. Hyoushin's brow knitted, and he took a step or two towards the mound, eying it keenly.

"Maichu, are you hurt?" He asked softly.

"No, but friggin' confused." Maichu dusted himself down, shaking his head. "At least some of the snow round here is fresh an' soft enough to fall into. But yeesh — what *was* that, Commander?"

"Red light." Hyoushin remarked absently. His left hand closed around the hilt of his sword and he pulled it from his belt, pausing for a moment, then extending it towards the marker. Again, ruby light glimmered around the mound, and he paused, drawing back. "Protecting this place."

"Do you think it's Ashitare? Is the Shinzahou here?" Kayu demanded, and Aoiketsu snorted.

"Seiryuu doesn't go around making bits of snow glow red, Kayu." He said disparagingly. "Maichu and I went to get Suiko's scale and it was protected by blue light. He's the *Azure* Dragon, after all — why would this have anything to do with him?"

“Yet I feel Kayu might be along the right lines, even if he has settled upon the wrong deity.”

Hyoushin returned his weapon to its sheath, gazing at the mound thoughtfully.

“I am not an expert on the ways of the Beast Gods, but is it not true that the God who guards the southern lands is the Phoenix Suzaku, and that he manifests himself with red light?”

“Suzaku?” Maichu’s eyes widened. “You mean those damn southerners came all the way up here? And what… is this some kind of *shrine*? Something to keep us out?”

Hyoushin pursed his lips. Then, he shook his head.

“I think… it’s a grave site.” He said at length. “And that we have discovered the one whom Ashitare fought for the Shinzahou. The war between Kounan and Kutou was bloody… and I imagine that this mountain saw a fierce fight. We know that Ashitare was half wolf, half man — I cannot imagine anyone having put up a battle against him for very long. Yet, Ashitare was buried in the form of a wolf, not as a man… so whatever happened on this peak, it stole the life of two men. One of which was Ashitare… and the other…”

He gestured towards the grave.

“One of Suzaku’s.”

“One of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi?” Aoiketsu glanced at the Meihi, who nodded.

“That would seem likely.” He agreed. “And that someone placed a barrier around his resting place, to prevent people such as you or I from disturbing his remains. In which case, this grave has been here as long as Ashitare has been dead — the barrier has protected it even against the elements.”

“Spooky.” Maichu shivered. “Do you think his ghost haunts here? I’ve heard stories about soldiers killed in battle…”

“Before and beyond the grave.” Hyoushin pursed his lips. “I don’t know, Maichu. Perhaps.”

“Ghosts aren’t real, are they?” Another soldier asked hesitantly. Hyoushin spread his hands.

“I was told that the one who guarded the Shinzahou was in Hokkan, both before and beyond the grave.” He said simply. “Though I cannot imagine that a warrior of Suzaku is protecting a treasure of

Seiryuu. So no, I think you can relax on that account. I do not think we are about to encounter a Suzaku spirit."

"Hyoushin-sama! Over here!"

As one of the men let out a yell, the group turned, seeing for the first time that the high rising cliff face behind them was actually not just a cliff face but that beneath the overhanging, snowy rock there was what appeared to be a great metal door, carved with the image of Genbu. Hyoushin's eyes narrowed.

"And this must be the place the Shinzahou was." He reflected. "Although I am losing faith that we will find our treasure on this mountain. I can't believe Seiryuu would leave something so precious so near the dead body of an enemy. Still, we must investigate fully. Open the door — we will go inside."

"It's damn heavy." As the soldiers hurried to obey their Commander's instructions, Maichu grimaced, casting Aoiketsu a rueful look. "Why is it we spend all our time shoving open doors and dividers to get holy treasures, Aoi?"

"I guess it's a good way of keeping people out?" Aoiketsu grinned back. "But you heard the Commander. Do you really think a Suzaku warrior is buried in the snow here?"

"Well, it did glow like a beacon." Maichu looked uncharacteristically thoughtful. "Guess it must've been."

"It's still a terrible place to die, Maichu." Aoiketsu shivered, and Maichu laughed.

"But he was the enemy, so it's not so bad, right?" He teased. "It wasn't Ashitare who died on this bleak mountain after all. Was it?"

"From what Hyoushin-sama said, it sounded like he did… or something." Aoiketsu sighed, renewing his effort against the door. "I don't understand about the Shichi Seishi. Seems to me they had some pretty weird abilities, some of them."

"Remember, Shougun was one of them." Maichu said warningly, and Aoiketsu nodded.

"I know." He agreed. "But then that girl last night — she did say that someone vaporised a bunch of people to set Ashitare free. That's sort of frightening, when you think about it. It's a damn good thing he had control of it — and that he was on Seiryuu's side. I mean, imagine what you could do with that kind of power…"

"Didn't help him in the end, though, did it?" Maichu said pensively.

“Ashitare died in the snow. Shougun in some strange world we don’t even know anything about. God knows what happened to the others, but they all died, didn’t they? All because of Suzaku an’ their people.”

“Guess the least we can do is find Yui-sama’s treasure, then.” Aoiketsu reflected, as the heavy door finally creaked open beneath their pressure, the frozen hinges giving way to the soldiers’ concerted effort.

“Shit, it’s dark in here.” One man exclaimed, and Hyoushin eyed him in faint amusement.

“I believe it’s what’s called a cavern.” He said lightly. “Kayu, a light, if you please.”

“Light?” Kayu looked foxed, and Maichu sighed, rolling his eyes as he reached into his pocket, producing flint as he sparked one of the ancient torches that hung in sconces around the walls. It sputtered and flickered for a moment, the blazed brightly, and for the first time the Kutou warriors were able to see their surroundings.

“It just looks like a big ugly cave to me.” Maichu reflected. “Nothing special.”

“Appearances can be deceptive.” Hyoushin said thoughtfully. “Walk on, all of you. And be careful where you tread.”

“Where we…?” Aoiketsu glanced down at this, letting out an exclamation as he registered the fact the floor was covered with human bones. “Shit! Hyoushin-sama, are they…?”

“Human bones? Yes.” Hyoushin nodded. “I imagine that many thieves entered here before, to try and retrieve Genbu’s treasure.”

“And something slaughtered them?” Kayu swallowed hard. “Are you sure we should be in here without our armour, sir?”

“We will be quite safe.” Hyoushin assured him. “The guardians of Genbu no Shinzahou are no longer here, as their treasure no longer is, either. Wherever it is now, it is not on Koku-zan.”

“But what if Ashitare and the Seiryuu one are…?” Maichu asked hesitantly. Hyoushin shook his head.

“I believe we will find this cave empty.” He said briefly. “But to report to the Emperor, I must be able to say we have at least checked. Don’t hesitate — they are only bones, nothing more. They cannot hurt you… they are long beyond putting up any kind of fight.”

“We better watch Aoi — he might keel over.” One soldier

remarked, causing laughter from several of the others, and indignation flickered in Aoiketsu's eyes.

"Shut up! I'm fine!" He snapped.

"Well, I guess none of them are exactly bleeding." Maichu glanced at the ground, then offered his friend a playful smile. "So you're all right. Don't be so stuffy, Aoi — it doesn't suit your particular beauty, pulling those kinds of faces."

"Oh, can it, you idiot." Aoiketsu grimaced back at him. "You're meant to be looking for a holy treasure, not picking on me."

As the soldiers meticulously fanned out and examined the high-ceilinged cavernous chambers that had once been the shrine and resting place of Genbu no Shinzahou, it soon became apparent that Hyoushin's Meihi informers had been right. The cave was long since abandoned, and despite their search, they could find no evidence that anything mystical still remained.

"It really is just a cave." Maichu said disgruntledly. "After we came all the way up here. Damn northern mountains — I really don't like Hokkan!"

"But we have done all we can, so I imagine we will be returning to Kutou soon enough." Hyoushin said slowly. He reached for the mirror that hung at his belt, glancing at it, then rubbing his hand over the shiny surface.

"Kintsusei-sama?" He murmured. "It's Hyoushin, making report on Koku-zan."

"Hyoushin?" The voice began as faint, the image grainy, but as the men gathered around they could see their Emperor's face glittering in the smoky, clouded glass of Kikei's enchanted mirror. "What have you to tell me?"

"Little, Sire. There is no sign of any holy treasure and it seems an impossibility from local sources that Ashitare is the Guardian of our Shinzahou." The Meihi reported gravely. "We have found no leads to tell us where to search — with your permission, I will bring the men home."

There was a pause, then,

"I will speak to Kikei, and have him consult Suiko again. As yet he hasn't managed to raise her a second time, but before you leave Hokkan, I'd like to ask her for more details." The Emperor said softly. "Take your men to Touran and await my contact, Hyoushin… I will let

you know as soon as I can what the situation is."

"Yes, Sire. My apologies for having failed in your mission."

"No, it's not your fault. You've done well and been as diligent as ever, I'm sure." The Emperor sighed. "I will speak to Kikei directly… and contact you as soon as I have more to tell you."

"As you wish, Kintsusei-sama." Hyoushin inclined his head slightly. Then, as the mirror faded and dulled, he glanced at his companions.

"You have heard your Emperor's instruction." He said quietly. "We will return to Touran, and await his command."

"At last." Maichu murmured. "I never thought I'd be happy to go back to that frozen excuse for a city, but at least it has wood fires!"

"Do you think we'll stay in Hokkan and continue looking, Hyoushin-sama?" Aoiketsu asked as they left the cavern, passing the mysterious grave as they did so. Hyoushin eyed him for a moment, then he spread his hands.

"As the Emperor wills it." He said simply. "At least we have ascertained one thing of use… that wherever Seiryuu no Shinzahou is — it is not hidden on or around the Black Mountain."

"I never thought I'd actually be glad to be in Kounan."

As Hikari gazed out of the window of the big house towards the mountains, she let out a sigh, a pensive expression in her dark eyes. "But I really am, Shishi. When we came over that border… I felt that we were less likely to be in danger. We got the Shinzahou, and finally, we've left all that snow behind."

"You're telling me." Shishi sighed, dropping down beside her. "I've never been to Yukigase before, but like you, I'm damn glad that it's within Southern borders. Kashira an' Chichiri's old friend might be as weird as anything, but he has a nice big house an' it has nice warm fires. Even a bandit needs to thaw out from time to time… an' now we've crossed into Suzaku's land, the Shinzahou should be safe enough. Right?"

"I guess so." Hikari shrugged her shoulders, stifling a yawn. "I'm just glad we've stopped walking."

It was three hours since the travel party had left the farm belonging to Amiboshi and his family and, as the sun had climbed in the sky, the weary group had finally stumbled through the last of the mountain

path and into Kounan, reaching the northern village of Yukigase and registering that, after what had seemed like endless tracks through snow, they were finally moving towards home. Once he had realised they were indeed in Yukigase, Chichiri had immediately turned away from the possibility of staying in an inn, instead approaching the home of the village elder with the remark that "An old friend of Suzaku's lives in this area, you know."

The 'old friend' had proven to be the strangest looking man that Hikari had ever seen, and it had only been her weariness and the strong reminder of Chichiri's words about appearances that had prevented her from laughing out loud at seeing him. He was of a similar age to the two Suzaku Seishi, built like a brick wall, with both height and width to his brawny body. And yet, despite this, his hair had been woven back in a very feminine style and he had been robed in the most delicate of woman's attire, his face made up like a city courtesan as if attempting to conceal the truth of his gender from prying eyes. At the sight of them he had exclaimed, then ushered them into his home, ordering the house staff to prepare both rooms and food for the dishevilled wanderers, and as they had settled down to eat a hearty meal, Hikari had realised that beyond this oddity's appearance beat a strong, kind heart.

"Tamatama-san is strange." She said now, resting her chin in her hands as she considered. "Dressing up like a woman, when he's so obviously not one. Yet… he seems kind enough. And if he's a friend of Tasuki and Chichiri's, I guess he must be a good person."

"He did feed us." Shishi said ruefully. "And at short notice, too. I guess you're right."

She shot the schoolgirl a sidelong glance.

"Aren't you tired?" She asked. "You looked all in on the farm, and we did just walk through the mountains in the cold. Yesterday you had plenty to say about that… are you all right?"

"You had plenty to say too." Hikari reminded her, and the bandit flushed.

"Touche." She acknowledged. "But I thought we'd left the hatchet buried in all that friggin' snow. Didn't we?"

"We did." Hikari agreed, turning to face her companion as she made herself more comfortable in her seat. "And I was trying not to complain. That's all."

She shrugged.

“I am tired.” She admitted. “But I’m also too hyped up to sleep. I’ve a lot of questions, now. A lot of things I don’t understand and a few things that I do. What happened on the farm… has sunk in, now. What I did, and everything. It was… sort of instinctive at the time. Strange. Chichiri said he and Tasuki had to protect the Shinzahou, and were drawn to it. But I didn’t think I would be drawn to protect them, too. When I think about it, it scares me. I could’ve been killed. But…”

“But you weren’t.” Shishi reflected. “Chichiri did say that you had powers stronger than his. You just can’t use them yet. But I guess you did use them a little bit today. And I’m glad you did, too. I mean, I couldn’t see this Suboshi ghost dude, and I’m not sorry about that. But he sounds pretty damn crazy to me.”

“He was angry. But I feel sort of sorry for him… for both of them.” Hikari sighed. “I don’t know why, exactly… I just do.”

“Amiboshi, I understand. His brother’s a nut-job.” Shishi snorted. “But I’m sorry, I wouldn’t feel sorry for a ghost who tried to kill me. Chichiri said the brat killed your Dad’s family, after all — and you’re going to be all right with that?”

“I don’t even know really who my Dad is, at the moment. Whether he can be Sukunami Taka and Sou Kishuku, and if not, which one is more real.” Hikari sighed, rubbing her temples. “And it isn’t that. I think it’s just… he was angry, but he was also sad. And I felt bad that someone my age had to die and was made to do evil things because of a war. That’s all. Amiboshi said it was Nakago’s fault — seems to me like everything bad that ever happened in this world was connected somehow to that guy.”

“No kidding.” Shishi nodded, a dark expression crossing her gaze as she did so. “Nakago was the ultimate in ultimate crazies. Until your Dad put a stop to it… he would’a destroyed everything.”

“Dad must’ve been strong and brave both.” Hikari reflected. “I wish I knew more about it… There’s so much I don’t know and it’s driving me nuts.”

“Well, if Chichiri sends you home, you’ll be able to ask him. Right?”

“Sure. If Chichiri can.” Hikari looked troubled. “He looked even more ragged than me, when we got here. You think he’ll be all right?”

“Chichiri’ll be fine.” A fresh voice entered the conversation at that moment, and both girls turned to see Tasuki lounging in the doorway. He offered them a wolfish grin at their surprise, coming to sit down in

an empty seat.

“He’s sleepin’ like a baby.” He added. “An’ you should be followin’ suit, Hikari. It’s still a long way to Reikaku-zan, an’ we won’t be stayin’ more than a day or so here in Yukigase.”

“Hiki’s still coming to grips with being the heroine.” Shishi explained, and Tasuki chuckled, shaking his head.

“It should come natural to Tama’s daughter, doin’ somethin’ like that.” He reflected. “Though you were damn brave, kid. Your Pa’d be proud, that’s for sure. You *were* every bit their daughter, this morning.”

He glanced from one girl to the other.

“And you two have stopped killin’ each other an’ decided to be friends at last?” He asked lightly. “’Bout time.”

“I guess we have.” Hikari looked self-conscious. “I mean… well… we called a truce.”

Tasuki looked amused.

“You two are jus’ like Tama an’ me, when I think about it.” He admitted. “First time we met, we more or less tried to kill each other. But he’s one of the people I respect the most, an’ that’s no lie. By the time he left for your world, Hikari, your Pa an’ I were good buddies. I guess it’s jus’ the same with you two… two strong personalities clash to begin with. That’s all.”

“I don’t know if I’m all that strong.” Hikari looked doubtful.

“This morning begs to differ.” Tasuki shrugged. “Don’t under-rate yourself, kid. You do all right… you’re Suzaku’s blood in more ways than just one, an’ you should remember that. It served you well this mornin’, an’ no doubt it will do again, if the time comes.”

“I guess so.” Hikari said thoughtfully. “Maybe.”

She eyed him curiously.

“Chichiri will really be all right?”

“Yeah.” Tasuki nodded. “He has a habit of giving everything, when it comes to protecting something precious. Hell, I guess it’s a Suzaku Seishi failin’, when it comes to that. We all do — did — it. But Chichiri’s a damn strong individual. Even if he don’t look as much the fighter as all that, he is one — Tamahome aside, maybe he was the strongest of us all, on reflection. He’ll be fine with some rest. Trust me — he’s pushed himself further before, an’ lived to tell the tale. Only

difference is that this time there ain't no Mitsukake on hand to heal him."

"It was nice of Tamatama-san to let us stay here like this." Shishi reflected. "He's an old buddy of yours, Kashira? Really?"

"Well, more accurate to say he was a buddy o' Nuriko's." Tasuki said ruefully. "But yes. In a manner of speaking. He's as brain-kinked as Nuriko was — but as good a person, too. Makes me remember… to be honest. I almost wish we had made a detour to Koku-zan, on our way back. I ain't been to pay my respects to Nuriko in a long time — not with him bein' reborn an' all. But even so…"

"You miss them all a lot, don't you?" Hikari realised. "The other Seishi. And… Mum and Dad? You miss them, too?"

"Yes." Tasuki said frankly. "But we all know how things are. Tama and Miaka are in the other world an' I doubt they can come back here again. Not now. An' the other four have new lives to lead. So there's just Chichiri an' me left. But at least there's that, you know? I ain't complainin'. Life's fine. An' we have our memories — so it's not like they've all really gone."

"When I go home, I think I'm going to ask Dad about *his* memories." Hikari decided. "I want to know about Tamahome some more… and I want to know from him."

"Well, when you do, tell him we ain't forgotten either." Tasuki said reflectively. "Chichiri an' me — neither one of us ever will. Not so long as we live."

"Promise." Hikari nodded. "I'll tell them that. And how kind you've both been to me, too. I don't know if I like this world any more than I did when I first arrived in it — but at least I haven't been completely on my own here. It makes a difference… to know people care what's happening to me."

She pinkened slightly, and Tasuki laughed, getting to his feet.

"That's what it means, doin' Suzaku's work." He said lightly. "I'm goin' to go help Jin with collectin' firewood. You girls stay here, an' Shishi, make sure Hikari gets some rest, huh? I'm countin' on you."

"Yes, Kashira." Shishi nodded. "I will. Don't worry."

With that, the bandit leader was gone, the door swinging shut behind him, and the two girls were once more alone.

"You know, he is right." Shishi reflected. Hikari nodded.

“I know. And I will.” She agreed. “But not just yet. I guess… my brain just needs a moment or two to compute it all. That’s all.”

“Suit yourself.” Shishi shrugged. She cast her companion a glance, an amused grin touching her lips.

“You know, it’s pretty damn funny, when you think of it, that your folks called you Hikari.” She added.

“Huh?” Hikari looked startled.

“Well, don’t you think so?” Shishi demanded. “Since you’ve started glowin’ red at random intervals?”

Hikari grinned, a sheepish expression entering her dark eyes. Slowly she nodded her head.

“When you put it that way, I suppose it is.” She agreed. “I never really thought about it before, though. I just thought my folks were being airy-fairy or something. My brother’s name is Makoto — truth — so I thought it was just like that. Light and Truth — you know? Some weird optimistic thing — my mother’s kinda like that.”

“Well, at least it’s better than being named after a fruit.” Shishi grimaced. “On balance, Hikari ain’t such a bad name. An’ I suppose it suits you pretty good, now we know you’re the Shinzahou.”

“A fruit?” Hikari blinked. “What are you talking about?”

“My name.” Shishi pulled another face. “At least yours means something.”

“But you’re Shishi.” Hikari looked confused. “Aren’t you?”

Shishi laughed ruefully, nodding her head.

“Yeah.” She agreed. “At least, since I was two or three.”

“It’s not your real name?” Hikari’s eyes widened, and Shishi shook her head.

“No.” She admitted. “My real name is Karin. Kou Karin. Sucks, doesn’t it? S’why everyone calls me Shishi.”

“Karin?” Hikari frowned. “Why on earth?”

“Well, it’s my mother’s fault.” Shishi shrugged. “She had a sister who died before I was born, an’ that was *her* name. So when *I* was born, she wanted me to have it. Kashira — Papa — was too shell-shocked by bein’ a Dad an’ by the fact I was a girl, so he did nothin’ about it. It was Aniue, really, though, who started the whole Shishi thing. Because I had red hair, an’ was into everythin’. He began jokin’

that I was Papa's cub — because Papa's a wolf, an' all of that. But I ain't a wolf cub. I'm a lion cub. An' so Shishi sort of stuck. These days everyone calls me it — even Okaasan."

"And she's all right with that? With the fact you're not using her sister's name?"

"Yeah, she's kinda resigned to it now." Shishi nodded. "I never answer to Karin, anyway. I don't believe in having someone else's name. Shishi is mine, and besides, a lot of people in my life have more than one name. Papa is Tasuki, an' Genrou, an' Shun'u. Aniue is Kouji. Chichiri is Hou Jun. It's just normal."

"You don't call Chichiri uncle, either."

"Well, I never have." Shishi shrugged. "He's always been Chichiri. Jus' like I call Papa Kashira. Because that's how it is. I'm family to Shichi Seishi, but I ain't flauntin' that fact. They're my people, but I ain't usin' it to gain any advantages or favours. Besides, when you grow up with the bandits, it's dangerous. Kaou-zan bandits tried to kidnap me a lot of times, when I was small — that's why Papa taught me all the escape routes, so I could get away if ever there was trouble. They never did manage to grab me — but it's risky, if people know you have ties like that. So they're Kashira an' Chichiri. It's safer that way."

"You *do* call Tasuki Papa, though. You did it just now." Hikari bantered, and Shishi pinkened, shrugging her shoulders.

"Well, he *is* my Papa." She admitted at length. "An' I'm still his daughter too, as well as a bandit. I want to be jus' like him, when I grow up… he's the most important person to me, if you wanna know."

Hikari frowned, glancing at her hands.

"I wonder what my parents are thinking right now." She admitted. "We had a big fight before I left… before I ended up here. I don't know if they'll forgive me. I'm not sure what's worse — that they might hate me like crazy… or that they might be frantically worrying about me. I did something pretty stupid, and right now I feel bad about that… however I look at it, I messed up in a big way."

"What did you do?" Shishi's bronze eyes sparked with curiosity, and Hikari sighed, shaking her head.

"It doesn't matter… it's complicated." She said vaguely. "And I don't really want to talk about it."

"Okay." Shishi shrugged her shoulders. "Whatever it is probably

isn't that important anyway. I mean, it ain't as bad as you think it is, that's for sure."

"Huh?" Hikari looked bemused. "What do you mean?"

"Think Suzaku'd have chosen someone really evil to have his power? Dummy. Of course not." Shishi said scornfully. Hikari stared for a moment. Then she spread her hands.

"Well, maybe I'm not evil." She hazarded. "But it was still a pretty stupid thing to do."

"You know, you say that a whole lot too much."

"Hrm?"

"Stupid." Shishi grinned at her, laughter in her gaze. "Everything's stupid to you — you oughta watch that."

"I don't understand."

"Guess *you're* the one who's actually stupid, then!" Shishi chuckled. "But I'm serious. You called that ghost stupid. You called me stupid. You call everything stupid… after a while it gets kinda boring."

"Oh." Hikari pinkened. She nodded. "Maybe."

Shishi got to her feet, stretching, then holding out her hand to her companion.

"Kashira said I was to make sure you did, so you better come get some rest." She said frankly. "Let's go find Tamatama-san and ask him where you're to sleep."

"But…"

"Kashira is Kashira, Hiki." Shishi shook her head. "You do as he says, okay?"

"Fine." Hikari held up her hands in mock surrender. "I'll come. I guess you're probably right, anyway. I just… don't like being on my own, that's all. The first night I was in this world, I couldn't sleep right for feeling awful about Chichiri's family and being homesick and stuff. Last night I was gawped at by a ghost. And it's still… when I'm on my own, that's when I feel… that I miss my home most."

Her voice shook slightly, and Shishi pursed her lips, gripping her more tightly around her wrists.

"Then I'll stay, till you sleep. And I'll annoy you till you'd rather sleep than stay awake." She said decidedly. "Okay?"

Hikari eyed her companion for a moment, then a faint smile touched her lips. She nodded.

“All right.” She agreed. “Thank you, Shishi. You… aren’t stupid. I was wrong about that.”

Shishi laughed.

“You neither, even if you are a bit weird.” She responded. “Now come *on*, will you? You *are* slow, that’s for sure!”

“I’m coming! I’m tired!” Hikari protested, as the bandit gave her a tug in the direction of the door. “Woah — slow down a moment, will you? Not all of us are mountain lions, you know!”

“Pipe down else you’ll wake Chichiri an’ then Kashira’ll be on both of our cases.” Came the unsympathetic reply. “Sooner you sleep, sooner your chances of going home, after all. Right? So shut up an’ do as I say… I told you I’d stay with you, so you ain’t got any reason to complain about bein’ abandoned! Get movin’ — or do I have to *drag* you all the way?”

“I said I was coming.” Hikari objected, but as she allowed the impetuous redhead to pull her out of the room, she felt a flicker of warmth stir up inside of her.

“Maybe it isn’t so bad, being stuck with Shishi after all.” She reflected, as they went in search of the house’s enigmatic master. “After all, she’s not that far from my age, and… well… I guess now we’ve got past the misunderstandings… maybe we *could* be friends. At least, until I can go home. She’s right about that too — and I can’t worry about Mum and Dad until I’m in a position to see them. Best thing I can do is rest so we can leave Yukigase quickly. Once we’re back in the mountains — and once Chichiri’s magic has recovered — then we can think about that, and I can work out what to say to them when I get home. But for now, I’ll do as Tasuki wants and get some sleep. Otherwise I’ll hold everyone up, and I’m not going to do that. After all, this morning I wasn’t useless. And… and I’m not going to be useless again. So long as I’m here… I’m *not* going to be useless to anyone again!”

“How long is this likely to take, Kikei?”

Kintsusei sent his companion an anxious glance, pacing across the floor of the Seiryuu Shrine as the Priest prepared his spell, flitting between the sacred scale and the flickering flame as he concentrated his spiritual magic.

“If my Lord would remain a little more patient…” Kikei raised his gaze at this, faint annoyance in his expression. “It is a complex procedure, and Suiko is weak in this form. Drawing her from the scale without the Shinzahou is difficult and delicate — whatever sparked her into life so readily the last time is obviously not present this time. I am doing my best, but I need to concentrate… it isn’t as easy as it might seem.”

“I’m sorry.” Kintsusei sighed, bowing his head in acknowledgement. “Do what you must, Kikei. I am just eager to send word to Hyoushin as soon as I can — I feel so much time has already been wasted.”

“I understand, Sire, and I am as anxious as you to find out more about this treasure’s location.” Kikei agreed, bringing his hands together over the scale once more as he closed his eyes. “Just a little more time, if you will indulge me. I think… that maybe… I have located her energy, sleeping deep within the scale.”

Kintsusei’s gaze flitted to the treasure, and he frowned as he watched it glitter faintly with blue light.

“The last time, it responded much more readily.” He realised, keeping his thoughts to himself as the priest’s expression became one of intense concentration. “Was it because she used all her strength then, to give us the little information she did? Or was it something else? Was it… Aoiketsu’s blood, after all? But surely not… even one such as he… surely he can’t have so much power over one of Seiryuu’s artefacts?”

“Sire!” Kikei’s voice interrupted his musings at that moment and he glanced up, a gasp escaping his lips as he saw the flames flutter and then glow with a distinctly azure light. Slowly but surely, a shadow of a woman’s form became visible once more in their flickering depths, and he moved towards it, once more mesmerised by the beauty of the ethereal mage.

“Suiko.” He murmured. “We are honoured by your presence once again.”

“Koutei-heika.” The woman’s voice was little more than a whisper, as she fixed him with her unearthly blue eyes. “How may I serve the Emperor of Seiryuu’s Eastern lands?”

“We’ve been unable to find the Shinzahou, Suiko-sama.” Kikei said softly. “The Emperor sent his man north, but he has been unable to trace any sense of it. We were hoping you might give us a little more information on its whereabouts.”

Suiko sighed, clearly irritated by the request, and she spread her hands, faint blue ash dropping to the floor of the shrine as she reached out to touch Kintsusei on the arm.

“The Shinzahou is no longer in the North Country.” She said softly. “It has moved. And so your man may search, Koutei-sama. But he will not find… no matter how much snow he digs through.”

“Moved?” Kintsusei paled, staring at her in horror. “But how? Who…? How could that happen? Where has it moved to — has whoever is guarding it taken it somewhere safer — somewhere away from prying hands?”

“Seiryuu has relinquished hold of his treasure.” Suiko said evenly, her ghostly hair fluttering in an imaginary wind as she fixed her gaze on him. “Suzaku now undertakes to care what was once hidden in the snow. It moves south, in the hands of those marked by the Phoenix.”

“The Phoenix?” Kintsusei whispered. “*Suzaku*?”

“Surely you jest, Suiko?” Kikei asked sharply.

“I do not joke about holy treasures, Lord Priest.” Suiko shook her head. “The treasure has crossed from the land of snow to the land of the sun. It is now the burden of the men of the red bird… you will not seek it out in the North.”

“Kounan.” Kintsusei bit his lip, fear flickering in his heart. “But why… what would *they* want with our treasure? And *why* would they even… why *now*? Can it be true… are they planning to invade Kutou? There *has* been a stronger military presence at the Eastern border in recent weeks… Kikei, do you think…?”

“Suiko, can you tell us exactly where the Shinzahou is now?” Kikei demanded, and Suiko shook her head.

“I have not the strength for such a task.” She said flatly, as if it was the Priest’s own fault that this were the case. “It moves south. That is all I can tell you. I am not a map, nor a guide to the four lands. I am a mage of Seiryuu — my concern is the Eastern Province. Without the Shinzahou, I have no power to be any more than you see me now. It is the power of the Shinzahou that calls to me — not my power in seeking it out.”

“But it is definitely now in Kounan?”

“As I said.” Suiko inclined her head slightly. “Borne by the men of the stars of the South.”

With that her form flickered and faded into a cascade of ash, and as

the fire died back, Kikei and Kintsusei exchanged glances.

“Why would they do this? Why would Reizeitei endorse such a thing, if not to launch an invasion against Kutou?” Kintsusei was the first to break the silence, and Kikei clenched his fists, looking frustrated.

“This is what comes of sending a soldier to do a priest’s job.” He muttered. “Infiltrating the North is enough of a bother… but that now we might have to investigate the Southern lands…”

He faltered, shaking his head slowly, and Kintsusei could see that his mind was working through the options carefully one by one.

“I will contact Hyoushin and tell him.” The Emperor said softly. “He can head south, instead of east… and find the Shinzahou. Touran is not so far from the border with Kounan, in the final analysis. A few days riding…”

“Hyoushin has already failed.” Kikei shook his head. “Recall your useless heathen, Kintsusei-sama. He is a man of arms and he is dead to Seiryuu’s magic. We need another strategy — and he will not do.”.

“Hyoushin isn’t a useless heathen.”

There was reproof in Kintsusei’s tones as he glanced at the priest, censure in his dark eyes. “He’s done well, following the instructions he was given… and I trust him more than any other to carry out my orders to the letter when it comes to travelling into other lands.”

“As you say, my Lord.” Kikei inclined his head as if accepting he had gone too far, his beady eyes heavy-lidded as he met his Emperor’s gaze. “But be that as it may, you must realise that to send soldiers into Kounan is a risky premise. The South is not like the northern territories — war is still fresh in the memories of our people and their own. To send Hyoushin and his retinue across that border unarmed would be reckless — to send them armed could be seen as tantamount to a renewed declaration of warfare. Kounan is a strong power these days — stronger than it’s probably ever been. You said yourself that their military presence at our border is already increased. Do you really want to take such a risk, with Kutou in such disarray?”

“No.” Kintsusei sighed, looking troubled as he slowly shook his head. “I do take your point… and you are right. I just… am not sure in whom to put my faith, if not in Hyoushin. You and he are the only ones in whom I have complete trust, Kikei — and I can hardly send *you* to Kounan, can I?”

“No, my Lord.” Kikei seemed faintly amused at this idea. “But as

you trust Hyoushin's judgement to choose his men, maybe you can put equal faith in mine? On reflection, I may… have a suggestion which could solve the problem at hand."

"A suggestion?" Kintsusei cast him a startled glance, and Kikei nodded his head.

"Yes, my Lord." He murmured. "If you will follow me — I have someone to whom I'd like to introduce you."

"Someone…?" Kintsusei frowned

Kikei nodded.

"Someone who, by coincidence, I had summoned on an entirely separate matter." He agreed. "But in the circumstances, my Emperor's need is evidently greater, and must take priority to my own affairs."

"I see." Kintsusei felt confused, but he nodded his head. "Very well. I do trust in your judgement, Kikei — if you think there is another way to relieve Kounan of our treasure. The situation is delicate, as you've already remarked — that the men of the South have gone north to seek our holy treasure really does make me nervous about a potential attack by Reizeitei's army on our badly defended lands. Yui-sama's Shinzahou must be retrieved at all costs — who knows what other tricks Kounan might have up their sleeves?"

"Indeed, given that two of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi still live, my Lord." Kikei agreed softly. "And it seems, from Suiko's testimony, that *they* are the ones who currently bear the Shinzahou. We do not know if they have possession of their own Shinzahou already, but we can't risk the fact that they might. With the power of their holy treasure and our own, they *might* even find a way to raise Suzaku."

"Something we can't allow." Kintsusei steeled himself. "No, you are right. Sending Hyoushin south at the moment would be dangerous for him as well as unwise for Kutou. I will hear your suggestion, Kikei — you are intelligent and if you can find a way to get Yui-sama's earring back from the South without sparking a war…"

"I believe so, my Lord." Kikei nodded his head, pushing back the dividing door that led towards the suite of rooms he called his own. "If you'd just step this way."

Kintsusei stepped carefully into the outer chamber, which operated as Kikei's unofficial study, and as he did so, he became aware of another man waiting beside the wood-carved desk. At their entrance, the man bowed his head, as if he had been carefully instructed to do so, and as Kintsusei gazed at him, he felt a sense of unease well up

inside of him.

“Kintsusei-sama, may I present Geiyo Miramu.” Kikei said softly.

The stranger raised his head, meeting the Kutou leader’s gaze for the first time.

He was only a young man, Kintsusei decided — certainly not more than five years older than Aoiketsu and his companions, but somehow, there was the sense of age and experience in both his expression and his bearing. Thick dark hair was tailed back from his face in a long braid, with stray wisps falling around his face that gave him a faintly wild look. He was dressed all in black, except for the red-threaded kanji character for ‘shadow’ slashed across the weaving collar of black leather at his throat. Gold earrings glittered in the lobes of his ears, but his overall appearance was simple and unshowy, giving the impression of a man who relished life living in the shadows. He was unarmed, as befitted palace security, yet even so he had an air of danger about him, and although he was lithe rather than brawny, the Emperor had the impression that he could hold his own in a fight.

A faint curl of a smile twitched at the edges of his lips at the Kutou leader’s scrutiny, and Kintsusei realised that he was not at all phased by the fact he was standing within a royal palace, or before an Emperor. Despite his position, Kintsusei was unnerved by the intensity in the stranger’s eyes, their unusual, deep indigo colour giving the impression they had been carved from some kind of bewitched gemstone as they glittered with interest and anticipation.

“It’s my pleasure, Koutei-sama.” He spoke in soft tones, tinged with an unfamiliar accent, and Kintsusei frowned, casting Kikei a quizzical look.

“I don’t understand.” He murmured. “This man… you think… this man can obtain Yui-sama’s treasure for us?”

“I have no doubts that he can, my Lord.” Kikei’s lips curled into a smile. “You seek someone who is discreet, after all — someone who will not attract attention if he crosses borders. And someone who cannot be traced easily back to you. Miramu is exactly suited to such stealthy tasks… and I have great faith in his abilities.”

“You are too kind, Kikei-sama.” Miramu acknowledged the compliment with a casual, almost insolent nod of his head, and Kintsusei pursed his lips.

“Geiyo Miramu.” He reflected. “That is your name?”

“Yes, my Lord. The name my mother gave me, when she birthed

me." Miramu agreed, turning his strange eyes on the Emperor.

"Geiyo is a name from the West. Are you…?"

"Sairou born?" Miramu interrupted, and Kintsusei nodded. Miramu smiled, but there was a cold amusement in his smile, and he nodded again.

"Yes, Sire. You are very astute."

"Why would a man of the West offer his services to a King of the East?"

"I do not care to whom I offer my services, as you so term them." Miramu said softly. "I have no particular allegiance to Sairou or to any other land or people. I have *one* requirement, and that is that I am well paid for the errands I do. You are an Emperor, my Lord, and Kikei-sama has always been both generous and prompt with my payment whenever he has sought my help in resolving… matters of delicacy. It doesn't concern me whether you worship the dragon or the tiger — coin is coin to me."

Something danced in his eyes, as if he'd made a joke that neither of his companions could understand, and Kintsusei's unease grew. He glanced at Kikei.

"What sort of services… what sort of errands?" He asked softly. "Kikei…"

"Matters concerning your security, and the security of Kutou." Kikei said frankly. "You surely don't think it a coincidence that rebel leaders have disappeared or died in mysterious circumstances, or that stolen sacred artefacts have been silently returned to their rightful locations without a murmur or a fuss? Miramu has been working behind the scenes for me on and off for almost a year and a half, now. In that time he has relocated several desecrated treasures belonging to Kutou's crown, and rid you of several violent and homicidal enemies without further provoking the unsettled political state of this country. Such a man who can slip in and out of shadows is a prized asset indeed… I believe he is what we are looking for, to resolve our little Shinzahou problem."

"You're an *assassin*?" Kintsusei stared at the westerner, aghast, and Miramu gave a low chuckle, nodding his head slowly.

"One of many things I've been called… one of the more pleasant, I have to admit." He reflected. "If the coin is right, then yes, Sire. I will be an assassin. I will steal, I will kill, I will do as I am bidden to get the job done and to earn my wage. Every man has to forge a living,

after all — this is mine."

"You think sending an assassin to Kounan is less risky than sending a soldier?" Kintsusei sent Kikei a bewildered look. "Are you *sure*?"

"Miramu is from the West." Kikei smiled. "He has no obvious affiliation to my Emperor or his desires… a random theft in the night… and no way to trace it back to Kutou."

"Well, perhaps, but…"

"Desperate times, Sire." Kikei looked troubled. "Unless you wish to see Suzaku spread its wings over our skies, then we have to act… and decisively."

Kintsusei sighed, slowly shaking his head.

"This is something I hope never to see — Suzaku descending on us like a bird of prey." He said heavily. "But still, to send a professional killer into enemy territory… we are not talking about fighting ordinary men, Kikei. You said yourself that those who possess the Shinzahou are men of the Beast God. We can't look at them as we would look at any other enemy."

"On the contrary, my Lord, I see no reason why they should prove a greater threat to you — or to I — than any other man of the South." Miramu said softly, folding his arms across his chest as he considered the matter carefully. "They are human, after all. All men have weakness, particularly those men who others have put on a pedestal. In fact, I almost relish the chance to pit wits against Celestial Warriors… It would be a good test of my skill, if I could indeed relieve them of the treasure."

He smirked slightly, and again the Emperor had the impression that he was enjoying some secret joke at their expense.

"I'm sure your Highness would have no material objection if in the struggle, one or both of them were to lose their lives?" He added playfully. Kintsusei's frown deepened.

"I am not sending you on an errand to kill, Geiyo Miramu." He said firmly. "The death of Celestial Warriors within Kounan's own borders would indeed excite suspicion and I have heard how thorough Reizeitei is becoming in maintaining his country's peace. If I agree to this, then the understanding is that you will do nothing more but relieve them of the treasure — the Shinzahou which belongs by right to Kutou. Is that understood?"

Miramu's eyes narrowed, and a lazy smile crossed his lips. He

nodded his head, dark braid falling over his shoulder as he bowed once more before Kutou's Emperor.

"As you wish." He said softly. "There are many ways to achieve the same end, my Lord. But I will tell you this. If my life is threatened, I will not hesitate to kill my opponent, whatever the orders given me. My own protection ranks higher than any order from any King, no matter how high his rank or how great his riches."

Kintsusei eyed him once more, then slowly, nodded his head.

"In this, I believe all men of arms are alike." He acknowledged. "We defend our own person at others' expenses… yes, Miramu, this I understand. But if it can be avoided…"

"I understand, Sire." Miramu nodded. "And you have my word that I can retrieve the Shinzahou for you — you needn't concern yourself. I have never yet failed to complete a mission — and I have many, many tricks up my sleeve."

"Then Kikei, I will leave the final details to you." Kintsusei sighed. "I must contact Hyoushin and tell him he is recalled to Kutou. I won't pretend I'm not glad he's coming back — that the palace is more secure when he is here than when he is not. Do as you see fit, my Priest of Seiryuu — I have faith in you to do what is best."

"Your Emperor is a well-meaning man, Kikei-sama." As they were left alone, Miramu cast the priest a glance, an enigmatic smile on his face as the older man nodded.

"Indeed he is." He agreed quietly. "For Kutou, he has sworn to give everything he can."

"Such men are weak." Miramu reflected. "Like the men of Kounan — in the end, they lack the final, decisive instinct to seize what they need. He means well, but unless he does more than mean well, your country will not prevail, Lord Kikei. To win a war, you must be prepared to spill blood."

"My Emperor would claim that this is not a war, Miramu."

"Then he is a fool as well as weak." Miramu said pragmatically, slipping his finger absently into the fabric of his sash as he drew out a slim, silver dagger. He glanced at it for a moment, then grinned. "Just like your palace security… appearances are deceptive, and he needs to be more aware."

"Well, in that regard, you and I will act for him." Kikei rubbed his

beard smoothly. “In order to retrieve the Shinzahou.”

“Is it your Emperor’s will I serve, Kikei-sama, or your own?” Miramu asked, and Kikei smiled.

“In this our will is the same, so you serve us both.” He said softly. “You ask too many questions for a man who professes just to follow orders for money, you know.”

“It’s no concern of mine what the politics are. I just like to be in the picture before I begin to act.” Miramu shrugged. “That’s all. I wonder why it is that I’m only meeting Lord Kintsusei now, if I have been doing *his* bidding all this time.”

“Kintsusei-sama is a soldier — he believes in direct confrontation, not subtle, hidden methods.” Kikei admitted. “That is why up until now you have not been introduced to him. I am not sure he would have ordered such covert removal of his enemies — he has not been trained that way, after all. But now, the time is right. Go to Kounan, Miramu, and do as you’ve been bidden… but listen to me on one point. Should the blood of Suzaku’s men be spilt, it matters little to me or to Kutou in the long run. Kintsusei-sama seeks peace for this country — to achieve that, sacrificing a few southerners seems a small price to pay. Do not let his reservations prevent you from carrying out your firm objective.”

“I see you do have the rebel spirit inside of you, Lord Priest.” Miramu looked amused. “Very well. I understand your meaning. And do not concern yourself… I will not be traced back here. I am very adept at covering my tracks.”

“So I already know.” Kikei acknowledged with a nod of his head. “I leave it in your hands, then.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Miramu bowed his head once more. Then, as Kikei watched, he faded out of view completely.

“You can have faith in my success.” The words echoed out of the seemingly empty chamber. “After all, there’s never yet been a mission too difficult for me to complete. I *will* obtain Seiryuu’s Shinzahou — whatever it takes to get it!”

Chapter 11

Chapter Ten

The sun was high in the sky over Yukigase by the time Chichiri stirred from his slumber, blinking and struggling into a sitting position as he tried to remember where he was. The glittering black case at his bedside soon brought memory flooding back into his sleepy brain, however, and he smiled, reaching over to brush the casket with his index finger.

"Seiryuu no Shinzahou." He reflected. "I wonder if having this is enough… to protect Kounan from disaster."

"So, you're awake at last, are you?" Tasuki's voice from the doorway startled him and he glanced up, offering his friend a rueful smile as he nodded, stretching his arms over his head.

"Suboshi really wiped me out, you know." He reflected. "I think he was drawing power off this thing — I never imagined he'd be as strong as that."

"Not just Suboshi, huh." Tasuki came into the room, shutting the door behind him. "Lookin' for Hikari all night, usin' your power to suppress our life forces an' traipse us as far as the Kounan/Hokkan border. An' you've been worryin' about what she said, too. About what she saw… when she first came here."

Chichiri eyed him in surprise, and Tasuki nodded slowly.

"I'm right, ain't I?" He reflected. "How much sleep have you even had since the kid came here?"

"Till now, none, really." Chichiri admitted. He grinned, mischief lighting up his ruby eye. "You're getting scarily perceptive you know, Tasuki. Maybe Anzu's been a good influence on you."

"Oh, shut up." Tasuki grimaced in his direction, dropping down on the end of the bed. "I've known you too long, that's all. I ain't a complete fool — I know how your stupid brain works better than probably anyone else alive — includin' my sister. I know that where Meikyo is concerned, you'll do anything it takes, too. The kids may not realise it, but I remember well enough that you didn't even know she'd live to begin with. An' all of this — what Hikari saw — it's messin' with your head. Isn't it?"

“Some.” Chichiri looked rueful, nodding his head. “I won’t deny it. Though with Hikari being here…”

He paused, his gaze flitting to the Shinzahou casket once more.

“I wonder if this is enough.” He reflected. “I want to be able to send her home, Tasuki. Especially after she defended me like she did against Suboshi. She’s missing her world and her family and I feel bad for her because of that. But I’m not sure, you know. Taiitsukun did say it was to do with all four Shinzahou. But still, if she was in the other world — I doubt the Emperor of Kutou has the kind of power Nakago had to get to the other world, or a medium to do it. So if she was there…”

“You spend way too long thinkin’ about ifs an’ buts sometimes, that’s your problem.” Tasuki said bluntly. “Stop it an’ think of the realities for a moment, will ya? We’re in Yukigase. We have Seiryuu’s Shinzahou. Now we have it, are we keepin’ it in the mountain, or handin’ it over to Boushin to take care of?”

“It would probably be more secure at the palace — I don’t want to make Reikaku-zan a target.” Chichiri reflected. “Although if Suzaku’s relic is hidden there… which is another reason I think that the mountain is a bad place for any sacred treasure. On the off-chance someone managed to get past your bandits, Tasuki — better they locate only one thing, not several all piled up waiting for them.”

“It’s unlikely they would, but I see your point.” Tasuki nodded grimly. “Boushin it is, then. You’re right in that he can lay on guards an’ all of that… an’ I doubt that Kutou want to be fightin’ a war against us if they can avoid doin’ it. So I guess this means we’re going to Eiyou first, huh?”

“Probably.” Chichiri agreed.

“An’ as for you — are you all right?”

“I’m all right.” Chichiri nodded his head. “I needed to sleep, that’s all… I feel okay now, you know.”

“Magic and all?”

“Hrm.” Chichiri glanced at his hands. “Well, maybe not in that regard. I mean, it is there… but it’s still coming back in bits and pieces. Even if Suboshi was drawing power from Seiryuu’s treasure to attack me — it doesn’t work the other way with our Shinzahou, you know. Hikari’s power is still suppressed — and I guess my body’s a bit out of practice, too. We haven’t fought in this way for a while, Tasuki-kun — and I’m seven years older than you are, you know.”

He smiled ruefully, shrugging his shoulders.

“Guess it catches up to you, in the end.”

“Don’t you start talkin’ like an idiot.” Tasuki snorted. “Age ain’t nothin’ to do with anythin’. Bustin’ your brain frettin’ about things we’re not goin’ to let happen — that’s more likely what’s to blame.”

“I wish I knew that it wasn’t.” Chichiri admitted. “But I guess all we can do is fight it, huh? And hope we can do enough to save this world again.”

“Hikari was worried about you, you know.” Tasuki told him reprovingly, and Chichiri smiled. He nodded.

“She’s a good child, for all her faults.” He reflected. “I see Miaka and Tamahome both in her, you know. But there’s something that’s just Hikari, as well. I like her very much, to be honest… I’m glad that we’ve had this chance to meet her, even considering the circumstances.”

“Well, you ain’t sendin’ her home till you’re fit enough to find a safe way to do it.” Tasuki warned him. “And right now, gettin’ further south has gotta be our priority.”

He glanced at the window, then,

“You do know you’ve slept the clock round and then some?”

“*What*?” Chichiri’s good eye widened, and Tasuki nodded.

“We came here the day before yesterday.” He agreed. “You’ve slept solid pretty much since then — since after we ate, in fact. Hikari slept for a long time too, once Shishi managed to persuade her she needed to. The kid’s fine — feeling much better an’ she’s eaten — but you must be starvin’. Jin an’ Shishi an’ I have helped Tamatama with firewood an’ other things in the village, while we’ve been at a loose end — an’ Hikari too, since she roused up, she’s tried to do her bit too. But we shouldn’t hang around here if we don’t have to. Jus’ none of us wanted to wake you if you weren’t ready to wake up yourself. You know? You really looked grey when we got here… s’what made me realise you weren’t kiddin’ the other night, when you said you were tired.”

“Well, it was reckless, but I’ll live.” Chichiri smiled faintly. “But if we’ve been here that long, we really oughtn’t outstay our welcome, you know. I *am* hungry — and I won’t refuse food. But then we should think about moving south — from the sun, I guess it’s only just the afternoon, and we could get at least as far as Choukou and the

Shouryuu by nightfall."

"Choukou ain't my favourite stoppin' point, Chichiri."

"I know, mine either, but I do remember an old farmhouse that might still be available." Chichiri said softly, and Tasuki grinned.

"Okay. You win. I want to move, anyway." He agreed. "You get up, an' make sure you don't lose that thing, either. I'll tell the others what we're doin', and make sure they're ready to go at a moment's notice. I don't think any of them will mind. Yukigase may be Kounan, but it's still friggin' cold up here."

With that he was gone, and Chichiri smiled another rueful smile, getting to his feet as he picked his discarded *kesa* up from where it lay slung over the back of a chair. Absently he fastened it around his body, moving to the window as he glanced down at the scene outside. As Tasuki had said, the three younger members of the party were busy earning their keep in the cold but bright Yukigase atmosphere, and amusement flickered in his ruby gaze as he watched Jin trying to teach Hikari to cut firewood, guiding her hand on the axe as splinters went in all directions.

"She does seem happier, today, than she was before." He mused. "Maybe after all that her adventure in the snow has been good for her. Her smile seems less forced. I'm glad… after all, she *is* Tamahome and Miaka's daughter. And I want her to be happy, even if she does want to go home."

He rested his hands on the sill, watching the youngsters in their antics for a while. The tension between Hikari and Shishi had clearly dissipated completely since their conversation in Makan, and the afternoon tasks were punctuated by shrieks of laughter and playful shouts as they went about their endeavours.

"One of the family, almost." The sorcerer reflected absently, turning away from the window and grasping the black casket from the unit beside his bed. Slipping it more safely into the folds of his clothing once more, he scooped up his *kasa* and his *shakujou*, pushing back the door and heading down the long, narrow hallway to the winding staircase that led to the lower level. As he reached it, he was aware of Tasuki's distinct, carrying tones as he passed on his message to the teenagers, and his expression softened as he heard Hikari's eager question in return.

"Chichiri's all right, then? Really all right?" He heard her ask. "I was worried… he's been asleep for so long — longer even than I was. I didn't realise he'd used up so much of his energy as that."

“I’ll be quite all right, Hikari-chan, so don’t worry about me.” The sorcerer pushed back the door, stepping out into the cold sunshine as he cast his companions a faintly embarrassed smile. “You could have woken me, you know… I didn’t mean to hold everyone up.”

“Well, you don’t look grey any more, so I guess it was okay to let you sleep.” Shishi shrugged her shoulders. “After all, you’re not exactly young any more, Chichiri — I told you, you need us along to make sure you and Kashira are all right, too.”

“Cheeky brat.” Tasuki cast a playful hand in his daughter’s direction, ruffling her hair more than actually striking her, and Chichiri laughed.

“Well, I did wonder the same thing myself.” He admitted. “But I’m all right, now. And once I’ve had something to eat, we’ll move south. I can’t fly us anywhere, yet, but we should be able to get out of the frost zone and into more familiar territory before it’s dark, you know. I think we’ll make camp by the Shouryuu tonight, if we can get there and I’m sure we can. So long as Hikari’s blisters can stand more walking — I don’t think we’ll find horses to hire in Yukigase.”

“I’d rather walk than get on a horse.” Hikari said adamantly. “I’d fall off!”

“Wimp.” Shishi nudged her at this, but unlike before, the term held no malice, and Hikari merely snorted, pushing the other girl away.

“In my world, I go to school, I get trains, buses, and I walk.” She said frankly. “I don’t ride horses and I don’t intend on starting now. Besides, you’d be scared if you ever saw a train — I know you would. All this tough talk now — but I bet you’d scream like a baby, if you had to travel by the Tokyo subway system!”

“I bet I wouldn’t!”

“Sure you would.” Hikari put her hands on her hips. “They’re ten times as long as a carriage, they travel about sixty times as fast as a horse, and they’re big and loud and packed with people going to all kinds of places. The sound they make is louder than thunder, and they go under the ground, so it’s all in big dark tunnels with lights that don’t use fire or anything like it to keep things bright. You’d hate it. You’d freak out. So don’t pretend you wouldn’t.”

“Your world sounds really very weird, Hikari-chan.” Jin observed lightly, and Hikari sent him a grin.

“It’s not like your world at all.” She admitted. “But I think I’m starting to get the hang of this one, now. At least, a little bit. So long

as I don't have to get on a horse."

"Noone's gonna ask you to chop firewood again for a long time, though." Shishi remarked, and Chichiri's gaze fell on the battered, abused log that had been Hikari's attempt at cutting. He laughed.

"Well, we all have our own strengths." He reflected. "I suppose there isn't much call for firewood in your world either, Hikari-chan."

"Nope. Not really." Hikari admitted. "So we're walking then, huh? How far is this Shouryuu place, anyway?"

"The Shouryuu is a river that passes through Kounan and on into Kutou." Chichiri replied. "But the place I'm thinking of is not too far from a town called Choukou — a place where Mitsukake of the Suzaku Seishi once practiced medicine, a lifetime ago. My own people were from the same area, too — so it's a good bet to aim for, you know. I' m still familiar enough with the North country to be able to find our way without too many problems. Even if we *are* going on foot."

"*Your* area?" Hikari's eyes widened as she digested this, then, "Chichiri — is that… the river that… flooded?"

Chichiri started, staring at her for a moment. Then he nodded.

"Yes." He agreed. "Rising Dragon River. But that was a very long time ago now. I don't think anything like that has happened there in years — we'll be quite safe there."

"That wasn't what I meant." Hikari looked awkward. "I mean… don't you… you know… not want to go there? Isn't it… a bad memory… for you?"

"A bad memory?" Shishi looked confused. "Why, because a little water spilled out or something?"

"Chichiri's family were killed in that flood, stupid, that's why!" Hikari retorted, and Chichiri frowned, shaking his head.

"Shishi didn't know that, Hikari." He said evenly. "It's not something that's ever been discussed with her — it's not ever been important for her to know."

"Oh." Hikari reddened, her hand flying to her mouth. "I… I'm sorry. I didn't…"

"Shit." Shishi murmured, staring at her uncle in consternation, and despite himself, Chichiri felt touched by the concern in her gaze. "Me too. Is that true, Chichiri? Your family all drowned in the river's

flood?"

"My village was destroyed." Chichiri agreed. "And a lot of people dear to both me and to Mitsukake perished that day. Yes. But like I said, it was a long time ago. It's no longer an open wound — and when I go to the river, I consider it more me sending a message to those people, than anything else. Life moves on — it has to. And I have too much to hold on to in this lifetime to look back to one I left behind."

He offered the girls both a smile.

"Don't look so worried, either of you." He instructed. "It's all right. The only reason Shishi wasn't told was because it didn't seem relevant. Not because of any other reason. And like I said, I don't think the river will flood for us. It's spring here, after all. And I don't think we're due any heavy rain — it doesn't feel like it to me."

"Then we'd better feed you, so we can move." Tasuki reflected. "Shishi, stop starin' at him like that an' go ask Tamatama what's to be done about it, all right? I want to be outta here in the next hour, else we won't even make the river by nightfall even if we run."

"Y… yes, Kashira." Shishi snapped herself from her reverie, hurrying into the house, and Chichiri grinned, patting Hikari on the shoulder.

"I told you. Don't look so distressed." He murmured. "I know Aidou told you and I know why she did… it's all right. Really. But Tasuki is right. We shouldn't tarry here longer than we must. The Shinzahou will be safer when we get to Eiyou and can hand it over to the Emperor… so that's what we need to do."

"The Emperor?" Jin looked startled at this. "Shit, we're going to the palace?"

"Best place for it." Tasuki nodded his head. "No enemy in his right mind would infiltrate that place, not considerin' how strong Kounan's forces are these days."

He tapped his tessen.

"Even if we ain't on hand to guard it ourselves."

"Do you think that the Emperor would allow Shishi an' I into the palace?" Jin looked doubtful, and Chichiri laughed.

"At the moment, you're doing the God's work, aren't you, Jin?" He asked playfully. "So you'll be as welcome to him as we are, you know."

“It’s all right, anyhow.” Hikari assured him. “Reizeitei-sama is really gentle and kind. I’ve already met him, and he was really nice.”

She sighed.

“Handsome too.” He admitted. “I didn’t realise that Kings could be good looking as well as rich and powerful.”

Chichiri looked amused, as Jin shot her a startled look.

“Boushin… no, I mean Reizeitei-sama looks a lot like his father, as you remarked the last time.” The sorcerer agreed. “Hotohori-sama prided himself on his appearance, it’s true — but he was also well known for miles around for being one of the most beautiful men in Kounan. Bou… Reizeitei-sama has inherited a lot from his father, that’s all… although I’m glad to say narcissism isn’t one of *his* failings. And Jin, Hikari is right. He wears a crown, but beneath it he’s as much a man as you or I. And because of his heritage, he’s always paid a keen interest in the affairs of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi and those that surround them. Shishi is Tasuki’s daughter, you know. And you’re one of his bandits — I wouldn’t worry about being allowed in, you know. It will be all right, I’m sure.”

“If you say so.” Jin scratched his head, looking sheepish. “The last time I was in Eiyou, Mother was working it… the palace was the last place in the world either of us dreamed of going, although I guess she met a few of the guardsmen in her time there. I bet she’d not even believe it, if she thought I was going to meet the Emperor of Kounan.”

“Your mother worked in Eiyou too?” Hikari sent him a startled glance. “Oh, wait — you did say that you travelled around Kounan a lot before she died. But… I didn’t realise women could have jobs on their own in this world. I mean… well… it doesn’t seem like…”

She faltered, and Jin offered her a crooked smile.

“There’s one job women can always do.” He said briskly. “Mother was a prostitute, Hikari.”

“Oh.” For the second time, Hikari’s expression became one of dismay as she realised she’d crossed into taboo territory, and Jin laughed.

“You look pussystruck.” He reflected. “Hadn’t you worked it out already?”

Slowly Hikari shook her head.

“I didn’t think…” She faltered, and Chichiri patted her on the head.

“You have an innocent mind, just like your mother.” He reflected absently, and Jin chuckled, nodding his head.

“Chichiri-san’s right.” He agreed.

“I’m sorry.” Hikari looked guilty. “It hadn’t occured to me. I mean… I guess I didn’t…”

“It’s a fact of life in any world, I imagine — men will always want women, an’ pay for it.” Jin said pragmatically. “Mother had habits — she drank, an’ she dabbled in other stuff, too. Plus she had me, an’ she had to feed me somehow — so she worked. An’ she died workin’, too. So I ended up with Kashira — like I told you.”

“Noisy, fiesty little brat, he was.” Tasuki remarked nostalgically. “Wavin’ a bit of wood around an’ stealin’ food from the market stalls in Souun. Kouji an’ me followed him, an’ found out that he’d been tryin’ to support himself — he can’t have been more’n five or six at the time. So we decided he’d better come with us to the mountain — I figured he had the makings of a bandit in him, an’ I was right. Plus, Shishi needed a playmate — an’ it worked out pretty good that way.”

“I ain’t got any regrets.” Jin agreed with a laugh. “I think it was meant, that I was in Souun when the Kashira was, an’ that he an’ Aniki decided to take me in. So I’ve worked damn hard to repay it — an’ be a good bandit. Besides, I’m fond o’ Shishi — she’s like a kid sister to me, an’ we’ve literally grown up together since then. I’m better off on Reikaku-zan than I ever was trawlin’ around the south with Ma tryin’ to avoid bein’ beaten up by her or her clients, to be honest with ya. Ain’t nothin’ to say sorry for.”

He offered the schoolgirl another grin.

“Besides, I like that innocence o’ yours, you know. It’s sort of refreshin’…most people who hear about my past automatically join the dots an’ make the whole picture. It’s nice to meet someone who doesn’t automatically hear it an’ look at me as a whore’s offspring. So you can relax.”

“I’m putting my foot in my mouth a whole lot this morning.” Hikari sighed. “In my world… well, maybe it happens, but… it’s not accepted that it does. I mean, it’s sort of exploitation — that’s how people see it. And women who have jobs… they work like men do, in the same kinds of jobs. I mean, not all women do. Mother doesn’t — she chose to be a housewife and be around when Makoto and I get home from school. But my best friend — her parents both work and they work long hours. So it didn’t occur to me.”

“Your world *is* strange.” Jin remarked once more. “But you know, maybe it’s strange in a good way, huh?”

“Yes, and I’ll ask Taiitsukun about whether or not we can send you back there, once we’ve been to Eiyou.” Chichiri decided. Hikari nodded.

“If it’s all right.” She agreed. “I… would like to go home. If… you can.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do. We’ll consult Taiitsukun.” Chichiri grinned at her. “And hope she can give us some advice on how best to return Suzaku no Shinzahou to her own world!”

Well, so they were heading home.

As the group of Kutou soldiers crossed the cold mountain terrain towards the Eastern border of Hokkan, a faint flicker of a frown touched Hyoushin’s normally impassive features as he remembered the Emperor’s final message.

“*The best thing is for me to recall you and your men to Kutou.*” The man had said. “*If the Shinzahou has crossed into the south, as Suiko suggests, it’s too risky to send our soldiers there at the moment — either armed or otherwise. So bring your retinue home, Hyoushin — an agent of Kikei’s has been dispatched to Kounan to retrieve the treasure, and at the moment, I think it’s best we put our faith in his success*.”

“An agent of Kikei’s.” Hyoushin murmured, pursing his lips as he considered the possibilities. “He can only mean one man. I did not know that Kintsusei-sama had met Miramu the assassin. That he would choose to send such a man into a country with whom political relations have been so unsteady… I wonder if he truly realises the kind of man Miramu is.”

He sighed, twitching his reins as he urged his horse into a faster canter.

“The sooner we arrive back in Kutou, the sooner I can discover exactly what has happened in my absence.” he reflected. “It is true that Miramu is discreet, and that he has ways and means that I do not understand of getting in and out of places unseen. But he is also a killer and he is not afraid to spill blood, even when it is not necessary to do so. I hope that Kintsusei-sama has been so advised — though I imagine, if this was Kikei’s directive, my Lord knows little about the true nature of the man he’s now putting his faith in. Involving Miramu means that there’s bound to be an amount of unecessary violence —

and if Reizeitei-sama takes no notice of that, I dread to think what his internal security is like. It may yet cause more complications of the kind my Lord hopes to avoid."

"Commander?"

At Aoiketsu's voice, the Meihi forced the thoughts out of his head, turning to glance at his young protegee.

"Yes, Aoiketsu? What is it?"

"Do you know why we're heading home like this now?" Aoiketsu looked confused. "We haven't found the Shinzahou — are we giving up?"

"We're recalled by the Emperor's will." Hyoushin said evenly. "Why isn't important, except that he has summoned us. I believe that Kintsusei-sama has had other information and has decided on an alternative course of action. But we only need to concern ourselves with obeying his instruction — we are told to return to Kutou, and so we are returning."

"Well, I'm glad we are." Maichu reflected at this point. "Even if Hokkan is peaceful, and Kutou wracked by war. At least it isn't so cold in the Eastern lands, and there's a colour around other than white. If I see any more snow I think I'll go blind… I'll be glad to get into familiar territory."

"I think we all will be, Maichu." Hyoushin murmured softly, as a fleeting image of the mountain Meihi flitted across his thoughts. "There's no reason for us to be in Hokkan longer than we need, after all. And as you say, Kutou is home."

He glanced up at the sky, gauging the position of the sun, then nodding his head.

"I believe we should reach the border before nightfall." He decided. "And then it will be a mere day's ride to the capital. We have made good time so far."

"I just wish we could've found the Emperor's treasure." Aoiketsu said sadly, and Hyoushin offered him a faint glimmer of a smile.

"It's impossible to find something if it simply isn't there." he said evenly. "So we won't worry about that. We have carried out our orders and searched in the places and the manner we were instructed. I have faith in the Emperor, and I'm sure that Seiryuu no Shinzahou will soon be in Kutou once again."

"It's weird to think that it's all this fuss over a girl's earring." Kayu

remarked off-handedly, and Maichu nodded.

“Women’s jewellery ain’t my thing either.” He agreed. “But I guess that’s because it’s associated with a Priestess… they’re generally women, after all.”

“An astute observation, Maichu.” Hyoushin murmured, although his amethyst eyes flickered with vague amusement at his young soldier’s words. “Indeed they are.”

“It makes you wonder what kind of Shinzahou other places had, though.” Aoiketsu looked thoughtful. “I mean, if Yui-sama left behind a blessed earring — what did Genbu no Miko leave in that cave we searched? And Byakko no Miko and Suzaku no Miko? They must have left treasures too.”

“Yes… indeed.” Hyoushin agreed. “And it may come to pass that we will learn more about all of those. But I’m afraid my knowledge of the Beast Gods and their magic is limited — I would not like to guess what form these treasures take.”

“More girly stuff, probably.” Kayu reflected.

“I wonder if the Emperor will seek those treasures out too, to save Kutou from danger.” Aoiketsu wondered. “After all, doesn’t he want to raise Seiryuu? And if we don’t have a Miko — how can he do that? Won’t he need more than Seiryuu’s treasure to raise our God?”

“You are asking many questions again, Aoiketsu.” Hyoushin chided. “And these are ones to which I do not have the answers. You should curb your curiosity and await your instruction — the Emperor will act in whatever way best benefits Kutou — in that you must have ultimate faith.”

“I do.” Aoiketsu reddened slightly at the faint snub. “I do have faith in him, Hyoushin-sama. We all do. I was just wondering. That’s all. I want to see Kutou saved, and at peace, like Hokkan is.”

“I’m glad I’m not Emperor, having to figure all this out.” Maichu remarked baldly. “I’m happy just taking orders… I wouldn’t like to be the one working it all out.”

“Indeed.” Hyoushin glanced up at the sky once more, as he remembered his reservations about Miramu. “But we must simply trust that he knows the best way to act. And return to the palace, where we can afford him some protection against enemies whilst he does so. That is our duty, and the only one that we must currently fulfil.”

“Well, this seems as good a place as any to set up camp for the night, you know.”

As the group of travellers broke through a copse of trees, Chichiri turned to send his companions a rueful grin. “It’s starting to get dark, and if we’re lucky, and my calculations are right, we should be within reach of both the river and the old farmhouse I remember still standing abandoned in this area. With a little luck, I might have enough of my magic back to make the transport all the way to Eiyou in the morning — but I’d rather be safe than sorry — trying it now could be risky and I couldn’t guarantee a landing.”

“This patch looks familiar.” Tasuki reflected, and Chichiri nodded his head.

“I’m sure it does.” He said wryly. “We’ve stayed here before… it was a long time ago, but it doesn’t look like much has changed, you know.”

“Well, memories of this place are kinda mixed, but it’ll do — I’m hungry, an’ I seem to remember this stretch ain’t bad for fish.” Tasuki contemplated, sending his Seishi companion a wicked grin. “If you don’t mind doin’ a little bit of huntin’ on our behalf, Chichiri.”

Hikari cast Chichiri a glance, noting the look of reservation that flickered across his features at Tasuki’s remark. She frowned.

“Is something wrong with the fish here?” She asked tentatively, and Tasuki grinned at her, shaking his head.

“No. Chichiri jus’ has an original way of fishin’, is all.” He said frankly. “He hoicks them out an’ then throws ‘em back. He’s not so keen on landin’ an’ killin’ them.”

“I’m not much of a hunter.” Chichiri admitted, offering Hikari a smile. “But in desperate times, I suppose… I might not have a choice.”

“It’s all right, Chichiri-san. I can fish.” Jin said at that moment. “An’ Shishi an’ I can always find food. We both know the kind of things to be lookin’ for an’ I’m not bothered about landin’ or guttin’ fish if the need arises.”

“Besides, you still look kinda tired.” Shishi added, eying her uncle critically. “If you’re zappin’ us all over Kounan tomorrow, you oughta be takin’ it easy tonight. I keep tellin’ you — s’why Jin an’ I are here, to take care of you agin’ Suzaku folk — right?”

“Shishi…” Tasuki sent her a warning look, and got a mischievous grin in return, and he sighed, shaking his head.

“Well, at least I’m pretty sure if we send you two, you’ll come back with somethin’ we can eat.” He admitted in resignation. “All right… but don’t fall in the damn river, will you? It moves pretty quickly, an’ I ain’t jumpin’ in after anyone who’s fool enough to lose their footing. You got that?”

“Understood, Kashira.” Jin nodded his head. “Come on, Shishi. You heard him — let’s make ourselves useful, huh?”

“Right with you.” Shishi nodded. She paused, casting Hikari a doubtful glance. “Hiki, do you want to come too? Jin’s good at fishing and I’m sure he’d be able to teach you.”

“I… I’d rather not.” Hikari pinkened slightly. “I… I don’t swim very well, and… well… I’m not sure how I feel about… gutting fish. It sounds… sort of gross.”

“You *are* a wimp.” Shishi sighed, but the expression on her face belied her words. “Fine. It’ll probably be quicker that way anyway… just if you wanted to…”

“Hikari can stay with us and help set up camp for the night.” Chichiri said, amused. “There’s quite a lot of stray wood around here, and I have another job that she can do. We have a little time before the sun sets completely, and we ought to start a fire. The farmhouse is a roof over our heads, but it’s basic, dusty and rotting in places. It’s probably better if we can camp somewhere outside among the trees — and only have the old building as a potential retreat in case of storms.”

“A fire?”

Hikari glanced at him curiously as the two young bandits disappeared down towards the river in search of fish. “Chichiri, you saw what happened when I tried to cut firewood in Yukigase — why do you think I’d be able to start a fire?”

“You don’t have to do any cutting, you know. Just gather some stray branches and leaf dirt together.” Chichiri assured her. “With Tasuki’s tessen, we don’t even need to worry about how to start it. But there’s plenty of debris around — there must have been a storm in these parts in recent weeks. So much to our benefit — it makes setting up camp a lot easier from our point of view.”

“Look for the dry, brown twigs, Hikari.” Tasuki added, as he began to clear a space on the ground to build the fire. “The green ones’ll smoke some, but they won’t burn.”

“They all look brown to me.” Hikari looked helpless, and Tasuki

grinned at her, scooping one up and snapping it in two, holding it out to her.

“See?” He indicated. “Green.”

“Oh.” Hikari pinkened, then nodded her head. “All right. I think I get it now.”

“You really think you’ll be full strength by the morning?” As the schoolgirl set to her task, Tasuki cast his Seishi companion a glance, and Chichiri nodded his head.

“I think so, you know.” He agreed. “I feel a lot better now, even for walking from Yukigase. I think that all that sleep did a lot more for me than anything else. I imagine by tomorrow we’ll be able to make up a little lost time by taking the short cut.”

He looked rueful.

“I am sorry it worked out like this.” He added. “I didn’t realise how much of my energy I’d used until I couldn’t use it any more.”

“You’ve always been that kind of idiot.” Tasuki said easily, shrugging his shoulders. “It’s normal for you — don’t worry about it. You always use more power than you have an’ then wonder why it wipes you out.”

“Maybe.” Chichiri glanced at his hands. “It makes me wonder, though, if it is possible for a Seishi to draw power from a Shinzahou. And if so, if it comes to the point where we have to go to find the other two Shinzahou… are we going to be put in a similar position?”

“Guess that depends on the kid here, doesn’t it?” Tasuki flicked his fingers in Hikari’s direction, and Hikari turned, her arms full of wood as she registered the gesture.

“Me?” She asked, dumping the pile down beside the two Seishi as she cast the bandit a confused look. “But… aren’t I going back home, when we get back to the mountains?”

“That depends on Taiitsukun, and what she says about it.” Chichiri admitted. “But I think what Tasuki means is that we really need to try and draw more of your power out of you, Hikari-chan. If other Seishi can use their Shinzahou to strengthen themselves…”

“You should both be able to use me to do so, too?” Hikari sighed. “I’m sorry… I guess I still am a little useless, huh?”

“You’re not at all useless.” Chichiri assured her. “And it’s not your fault you haven’t been trained how to use this magic before. Don’t

look so tragic, Hikari-chan. It might be irrelevant. It may be that, since we have Seiryuu's Shinzahou and since we know where Suzaku's is, we can send you home. We'll see. Right now there are more questions than answers, and it makes no sense to worry about them."

"I suppose you're right." Hikari acknowledged, watching as Tasuki carefully built the wood she had gathered into a fire. "Is that stuff all right, Tasuki? I did try and check whether it was, you know, dry or not."

"It looks good to me, kid." Tasuki grinned at her, nodding as he pulled his tessen from his back. "Take a step or two back, will ya? I don't want to fritter you at the same time."

"I… all right." Hikari did as she was bidden, her eyes on the silver fan as it glowed and shone with hot flickers of flame.

"*Rekka Shin'en!*"

Tasuki flicked the tessen in the direction of the wood, and a steady, controlled stream of fire licked out around the branches, setting them ablaze in a moment. He nodded approvingly, and Chichiri chuckled.

"After all these years, you've finally got control of it properly." He teased. "And Tamahome's not here to see it."

"Tamahome?" Hikari looked startled. "Dad…?"

"Mm." Tasuki looked sheepish, glancing at the fan, then returning it to its holder. "Well, let's jus' say that ol Tama did get in the way of my tessen a few times, in the past. I seem to remember him bein' a little bit pissed about it too, on a coupl'a occasions."

"You… fried my Dad with that thing?" Hikari's eyes widened, and Tasuki spread his hands.

"Not on purpose." He objected. Then he grinned, a wicked, wolfish expression crossing his face as he caught Chichiri's eye. "Well. Much."

Chichiri looked amused.

"It's just what happens when you give one seventeen year old a fire-throwing harisen and another the ability to get in the way." He said nostalgically. "It's such a long time ago, Tasuki-kun — but talking about it like this makes it seem like yesterday that we were all together."

"I know what you mean." Tasuki acknowledged. "Seems odd that it's been as long as it has. Seein' Boushin really did bring it home."

"It seems strange to me." Hikari pulled her knees up to her chest,

hugging them tightly as she contemplated. “That you both and my father and the others who are dead… you seem to have been really close. And you’ll drop everything to do Suzaku’s work again, almost as if you enjoy doing it, despite the dangers.”

“I suppose it’s part of who we are as Seishi.” Chichiri looked surprised. “It’s instinct, that’s all. And besides, we *were* all very close as friends, Hikari-chan. All of us, despite our wide differences. We shared a bond of friendship which at times was more like brotherhood — for their sakes as well as our own, Tasuki and I have to continue the fight. Whilst we exist in these forms, it’s part of the deal, you know.”

“Chichiri’s right.” Tasuki nodded his head. “It’s just our way of keepin’ them alive, as well, I suppose. Since they ain’t here to fight themselves.”

“It’s just, Koutaku-san seemed so different.” Hikari leant back against the trunk of a nearby tree. “Like he hated it. Like his mark was a curse — and he wished it had never been him or his brother. Was it so bad, being a Seiryuu Seishi? And… if it was… I don’t understand. I mean, shouldn’t it have been… the same?”

“Seiryuu had one major problem that Suzaku didn’t.” Tasuki said darkly, and Chichiri nodded his head.

“Nakago.” He agreed. “I suppose you might say he manipulated the role of the Seishi to his own bidding. It twisted the whole of the situation — even twisted Seiryuu no Miko and made her fight against her friend instead of saving Kutou. I don’t blame Amiboshi for feeling the way that he did. Or for running away from it as much as he did. In the end, he fought more as one of us than one of them. That was Nakago’s fault too, though. Amiboshi first came to Kounan as a spy against us, in order to kill us when our guard was down. But I think he grew to realise the bond we shared, and wanted to be a part of it. In the end… it backfired for Nakago and his warriors. Once one of the seven’s will was contrary to the others, any kind of unity they had would have broken down. I know that Amiboshi fought Tomo, one of the other Seiryuu Seishi, to rescue Miaka from his spell, and Suboshi killed Tomo to protect Amiboshi from being slain. In a sense, I suppose, the division of Kutou’s ongoing civil war became reflected in the Seiryuu Seishi themselves.”

“It’s sort of sad, when you put it that way.” Hikari sighed. “I liked Koutaku-san. He asked me not to call him Amiboshi, even though he showed me his stellar mark and I knew it was who he was. And he didn’t try to fight — even though I got the feeling he could have,

somehow, if he had had no choice. It just seems like for both of you, being Suzaku's chosen worked out as a good thing. But being Seiryuu's brought him and his brother nothing but pain."

"I'd say that's probably true." Chichiri nodded gravely. "Amiboshi is probably the stronger of the twins, if he chooses to fight, Hikari. But most often it seems he chooses not to. He was never cut out for war… I imagine the memories scarred him badly."

"So he *does* have powers, like you and like Suboshi did?" Hikari looked curious.

"He has his goddamn flute." Tasuki grimaced, and Hikari's eyes opened wide with confusion.

"His flute? But… he plays really pretty music. How is that… is that his power?"

"Amiboshi's music is harmless enough these days, probably." Chichiri spread his hands. "But in the past… he uses it to push his life force into other people's and interfere with them and their brainwaves. If he wanted to, through his playing, he could kill a man without even touching him. Maybe many men — Miaka did say that he brought down a unit of Kutou soldiers that dared to attack Makan-mura during our war with the East. I don't know exactly what makes it work, but I do know that it's not a nice way to be attacked, you know."

He shuddered, and Hikari got the feeling he was speaking from personal experience.

"It bursts something in the brain, I imagine… either way, if Amiboshi really wanted to kill someone… I don't think it would be hard for him to do."

"Burst the…?" Hikari whitened, and Tasuki nodded.

"I'm tellin' you, I've never looked at a flute the same way again." He admitted ruefully.

"But Amiboshi is peaceful by nature." Chichiri said, offering the alarmed Hikari a smile. "Like I said, his music is probably harmless these days. I imagine the only time he'd ever use it in any other way would be if something threatened his family — he doesn't have the same wild temperament that his brother did, so you needn't look so alarmed. He's a good man, Hikari… tainted by war, but a good man nonetheless."

"But he… killed a whole… unit of soldiers?" Hikari said faintly.

“With his… his flute?”

“When you come to it, I guess most of us have blood on our hands somewhere or other.” Tasuki said pensively. “You already know your Pa brought down Nakago, right?”

“Yes… but… wasn’t Nakago… a monster?” Hikari asked softly. Tasuki grinned.

“More than.” He agreed. “But in war, there are casualties. Fightin’ for Suzaku, there are casualties. On both sides. That’s somethin’ in this world that just happens to be true.”

He shrugged.

“They killed our Seishi. We killed theirs.” He added. “It kind of balanced out, after a while.”

Hikari shuddered.

“This world really does seem to be full of killing things.” She said with a shiver. “I don’t like it. It isn’t nice.”

“No, it isn’t.” Chichiri agreed pensively. “And that’s why we don’t want there to be another war, Hikari-chan. For the sake of people like Shishi and Meikyo and Eiju who haven’t really seen that kind of conflict… we want to keep Kounan as peaceful as it is now. That’s our job as Seishi, even if it costs us *our* lives.”

“Chichiri’s probably one of the few who can say he didn’t take anyone’s life during the war with Kutou.” Tasuki added. “It ain’t just fish he shies from killin’, Hikari. He an’ you, you’re on the same wavelength… he ain’t big on the rubbin’ out of enemies, even if there ain’t no other choice.”

“And you?” Hikari sent Tasuki a trepidant glance. “How many… did *you* kill?”

“As a soldier, fightin’ for my Emperor? Couldn’t tell you.” Tasuki shrugged his shoulders. “Demons an’ monsters? Again, couldn’t tell you. In terms of Seiryuu Seishi? Jus’ the one. But it was an accident. The wench got in the way of my blade — I was aimin’ for Nakago. Stupid girl — a lot more could’ve been prevented if she had just let me hit him.”

He grimaced.

“I ain’t proud that I killed a girl, for the record. I don’t generally fight women, not even women like Soi.” He added. “But there ain’t much you can do to change the angle of a blade once it’s thrown… an’

she just shoved herself right in front of it."

"Soi loved Nakago." Chichiri reflected. "And maybe Nakago loved Soi. It's hard to say, you know… but he seemed to take it personally, when she died."

"And my mother was here, involved, during all of this?" Hikari bit her lip. "I guess I never thought of her as brave or anything, but I suppose she must've been. To be wrapped up in a war where people were getting killed — where she could have been killed… maybe I've underestimated her a whole lot. Maybe she isn't who I thought she was either… maybe I have things to ask her, too."

"Miaka was clumsy, too trusting and she had a penchant for food." Chichiri sent Hikari a grin. "But she was also probably the strongest person that Kounan has ever had to put faith in. She believed in us, in the cause we fought for… and that we were as real and as important as her own problems in her own world. She gave Kounan hope, Hikari. No matter how unusual she was, or what flaws she had… she was a truly good person. And a truly strong one, too. Thanks to her and her constant faith in us… Kounan is now at peace."

Hikari sighed.

"I guess there's really so much I still don't know." She murmured.

"Well, if you go back, you can ask them. And if you don't, you can ask us." Tasuki said comfortably. "No big deal."

"I suppose so." Hikari pursed her lips. She hesitated, then, "Thank you."

"For what, exactly?" Tasuki sent her a confused glance. "What did we do?"

"You've been kind to me since I got dropped in this world." Hikari pinkened. "I wanted to say it now, in case I… I forget, later, and don't get another chance. You… I know you're doing it because of whose daughter I am, and because I'm Shinzahou. But I… I'm still… grateful."

Chichiri grinned, reaching over to pat her on the head playfully.

"You're a good girl." He reflected. "Even if you don't think so. Have you forgotten that I owe you my life, Hikari-chan? You're more than welcome."

He eyed her keenly.

"And for the record, it isn't because of who you are, entirely." He

added. “I’m getting quite fond of having you around, you know.”

“Really?” Hikari looked startled. “You mean I’m not just a bother to you?”

“Who was it who came out to find me at the crack of dawn, to tell me she’d decided to stick it out here rather than run away back home?” Chichiri asked her lightly. “Given that, Hikari-chan, you could never be a bother.”

“I hope Mum and Dad feel that way too, when I go back.” Hikari rested her chin in her hands. “I did… do something… really really stupid before I left. Something I’m embarrassed to even tell you, to be honest. But Dad was really, really angry. And with me running off…”

She hesitated, then steeled herself, shaking her head.

“No. Whatever they do to me, I deserve it.” She decided. “I shouldn’t have let Arina persuade me, anyway.”

“Arina is your friend, isn’t she? In your own world?” Chichiri asked. Hikari nodded.

“Yes.”

“Not much of a friend, if she made you do somethin’ to make Tama mad at you.” Tasuki reflected bluntly. “Maybe *you* should be the one yellin’ at *her*, if that’s the case.”

“Maybe it *is* Arina’s fault, some.” Hikari acknowledged. “But I never know how to overrule her when she has a bright idea. It seemed simpler when she said it — I guess her family and mine have different rules and, well, standards. But I never thought about it before. Mother’s always saying how we’re better off than Ari’s family because there’s always someone at home for Makoto and I, whereas Arina’s parents are off all over the place working all the time. And I thought that was crazy — but being here, not being able to see them… I guess I’m realising maybe what it’s like for Ari for the first time. That her folks aren’t there and she never really knows whether they care or they don’t. So maybe… its not her fault. It’s… *my* fault. Because I… I should know better.”

“You’re makin’ no sense to me, kid, but so long as you’re happy, go with it.” Tasuki advised. Chichiri laughed.

“Tasuki-kun.” he said reprovingly.

“What?” Tasuki objected. “I don’t understand girls an’ I sure don’t understand teenage ones. Especially ones from Miaka’s world. What else do you expect me to say?”

Chichiri opened his mouth to reply, but then he hesitated, tensing as he raised his head towards the sky.

“Chichiri?” Tasuki was alert in a moment, his fingers flexing for his tessen as he read the expression on the man’s face. Hikari glanced between the two Seishi, alarm flickering in her own heart as she registered that something was wrong.

“What… what’s up?” She whispered.

“Something…” Chichiri’s ruby eye narrowed, and he sighed, slowly shaking his head. “For a moment… I felt something. Something strong… and dark… coming this way.”

“And now?” Tasuki’s grip tightened around the end of his tessen, and Hikari could tell he was ready to spring to his feet the moment anything changed. “Should we go find Jin an’ the cub?”

“No…” Chichiri faltered, then he closed his eyes, holding up his hands as if trying to sense something on the wind. “No, it was coming this way. Not towards the river. Towards us. Here. But…”

“But?” Hikari echoed fearfully.

“I can’t feel it now.” Chichiri opened his eyes, shaking his head. “It’s like it… vanished into nothing.”

“Are you sure your senses are firin’ on all cylinders?” Tasuki asked quietly, and Chichiri nodded.

“I think so. I can feel you, and Hikari, and I can sense Shishi and Jin.” He agreed. “I just can’t… whatever it was… I can’t get a lock on it now. But whatever it was… it had a strong chi. I didn’t like how it felt.”

Despite herself, Hikari shivered, and Tasuki frowned, sending her a sidelong glance.

“S’ok, kid.” He murmured. “If Chichiri says it’s gone, then…”

Before the sentence had left his mouth, however, an arrow came flying out of the darkening sky, and Hikari let out a shriek as it embedded itself in the tree inches from her head, almost leaping on top of Tasuki in her hurry to get away from it. Tasuki grabbed her firmly, pushing her behind him as he shot Chichiri an accusing glance.

“You said it had gone!” He exclaimed, even as he primed his tessen, scanning the trees for the archer. Chichiri shrugged helplessly.

“It had gone! It’s still gone!” He protested. “I told you I couldn’t feel it any more… and I *can’t*!”

A second arrow came blazing out of the darkness, and Tasuki's eyes narrowed as he flexed his arm, bringing the tessen down hard against it and knocking the barb back against the tree.

"Come out an' face us like a man, you coward!" He exclaimed. "If you want a fight, come get it already and stop lurking in shadows like a little girl!"

"Impressive words, Tasuki."

At this, a figure dropped down from the trees, landing before them neatly on his feet, a bow slung lazily over his arm as he gazed from one Seishi to the other. "Well, here I am… what are you waiting for? Aren't you going to set me alight and send me on my way?"

"Who the hell are you and what do you want?" Tasuki raised the harisen warningly. "Tell me, or else I'll do exactly as you just said."

"We seem to have gotten off to a bad start." The man seemed amused, bowing his head almost mockingly towards the irate bandit. "My apologies."

He flexed his fist, and in a moment the bow was between his fingers, an arrow slipping neatly from finger to finger of his other hand. As Hikari ran her gaze over him, she felt a cold chill go down her spine for, although he was not so very much older than she was, there was a cold glitter in his strange dark eyes that told of someone who was not at all afraid of killing if the need arose. In the darkening evening light, the red across his collar seemed almost like a splash of blood, and she shivered, biting her lip as she fought to keep her fear under control.

"Let me introduce myself properly." The stranger raised his gaze once more. "My name is Miramu, and I've come to claim something you have. Something that doesn't belong to you, or to Kounan."

"What the hell's all the screamin'?" At that moment, Shishi burst through the trees, Jin in tow, and Tasuki held up his hands, casting them a dark look.

"Stay where you are, both of you." He said sharply. "This joker thinks he's going to mess with the Suzaku Shichi Seishi. And he's about to get a rude awakening as to why picking a fight with us ain't a good idea."

At this, Miramu laughed, shaking his head slowly in appreciation of the bandit's fighting talk.

"You know, I've heard of you — both of you." He said evenly.

“Tasuki, who shoots fire, and reacts just as impulsively. And Chichiri, the sorcerer — the one who prefers to stalk the shadows — just as I do. Really, I have no personal grudge to bear with either you or your companions. As I said, I’ve only come for one thing — I’ve come to claim the object in your possession that does not belong to you.”

“What object would that be, Miramu?” Chichiri spoke this time, bringing his fingers up before his face as he projected a barrier around his companions. “You’re not being very clear, you know… about your true objective.”

“You’re not so stupid as that.” Miramu’s indigo eyes narrowed, and he shook his head. “But if you insist, I’ll spell it out for you.”

His lips twitched into a smile.

“Seiryuu no Shinzahou.”

“What makes you think we would have a treasure belonging to Seiryuu?” Chichiri asked levelly. “We’re warriors of Suzaku.”

“I’m not a fool, either.” Miramu cocked his bow. “And talking is all very well, but I’m not one for long, drawn out confrontations. Hand it over, or else it might get nasty.”

“You think you can pierce my barrier?” Chichiri asked softly. Miramu laughed.

“I know I can, sorcerer. Just as I concealed myself from you in the trees.” He responded lightly. “I can suppress all trace of my presence, and slip an arrow through your magic shield. And if I do, it’s death to anyone I hit. My aim is pretty good, you know, especially at short range. Those shots before were just a warning — to tell you I was here. But now it’s serious. I’m not afraid to kill if I have to.”

“We’ve faced archers and arrows before. We’re not that weak.” Tasuki snapped, and Hikari, hiding behind the bandit’s brawny body hoped inwardly that his words were true. Miramu inclined his head in acknowledgement of his words.

“Probably.” He agreed. “But I don’t take chances. My arrows are unique — they’re specially designed to conceal a special, surprise gift within the tip.”

He smiled, and Hikari shivered at the cold malice in his glittering eyes.

“Poison.” He whispered. “And none who have ever been pierced by my arrow have lived to tell the tale. Do you want to pit yourselves against those odds for the sake of an earring that doesn’t even belong

to you?"

He twitched the bow in Shishi's direction.

"Or maybe, the life of one of your young companions?"

"You even try and I'll char you to cinders before you even loose that wire." Tasuki snapped. "We've nothing to give you and nothing more to say… I've done listening. *Rekka Shin'en*!"

At his command, a flood of flame roared from the tessen, and Hikari's eyes widened as the fire flared out around them, licking up trees and branches as it coursed through the forest land. Far from being a tame lick of flame to light a campfire, the scared girl realised that this was the true power of Tasuki's tessen and that, to defend his daughter's life, he was quite willing to use it to burn the archer to a crisp on the spot.

Miramu leapt neatly out of the way of the flame, perching on one of the untouched branches as he gazed down at them.

"So you're going to make it hard for me?" He asked sadly. "You do realise, my killing you is contrary to my orders. But if that's the only way to get the treasure… I'll have to do what I have to do. If I don't take the earring, I don't get paid… and if you don't give it to me, you don't get to live. I don't see any benefit for anyone in that arrangement — do you?"

His eyes narrowed, although there was still the glimmer of amusement in their depths.

"Besides, stealing some other country's holy treasure is a low blow, you know. Tut tut."

"Amiboshi *gave* us the Shinzahou, you creep!" Shishi exclaimed. "We didn't steal it from him at all! *You're* the one trying to steal it!"

"Not if I persuade you to hand it over." Miramu chuckled. "That's not stealing. That's an amicable business arrangement in which I get what I want, and you get to live. Sounds fair, doesn't it?"

He cocked his head, eying them coldly.

"Last chance." He murmured. "The earring… or someone is going to die."

Chapter 12

Chapter Eleven

For a moment, nothing moved in the forest, as the cold-eyed archer primed his weapon, clearly ready to launch an arrow towards them at a moment's notice.

"I don't bluff." He murmured. "And I don't miss. Last chance… don't say I didn't warn you."

"Shishi, Jin, grab hold of Hikari and don't let go." Chichiri said urgently, even as he strengthened his barrier around them. "Don't ask questions, and don't hesitate. Just do it."

"Chichiri?" Hikari cast the sorcerer a glance, but he shook his head, his gaze not leaving their assailant.

"Just trust me." He said softly. "Do as I say, all of you. And stay close… behind Tasuki and I. It's easier that way."

"Do you want another taste of my tessen, you creep?" Tasuki glared up at the branches. "I'm not scared of you or your poisoned arrow. A real man would fight his battles face to face — poison is a weak man's weapon!"

"So we differ in terms of strategy." Miramu seemed unphased. "My apologies again. But I'm sure you'll agree that the bow and arrow is a true fighting weapon, Tasuki… and I'm more than willing to show you how good a shot I am… if you so insist. I can pick my prize off a dead body as easily as I can take it from live hands… if that's how you want it to be."

"Tasuki!" Chichiri exclaimed, and Tasuki hesitated for a split second, glancing at his friend and then nodding as he seemed to read some unspoken message between them. He raised his tessen, biting his lip, then,

"*Now*!" Chichiri shouted, and Tasuki flexed his weapon towards the trees a second time.

"*RekkaShin'en*!"

Even as the spell was spoken, the surrounding woodland became further engulfed in fire and as Hikari was sure they were all going to be burnt to death, she felt something grab her arm firmly, as the

world became strange, dark and swirly. She closed her eyes, opening her mouth to scream but her heart clenched in her chest and she found she could not make a noise. Instead she just swallowed hard, sure that she would be sick any moment if the dizzy spinning did not stop.

At length it did stop, as she clattered against something hard and dusty and she pressed her hands against it, struggling to re-orientate herself as she gazed around her in confusion.

To her left, Chichiri was eying his *shakujou* pensively, and as he caught sight of her, he offered her a faint smile.

"Just in time, but not the best landing. I'm sorry." He said frankly. "I guess I'm not quite there yet… but even so, he'll have a job following us here."

"Here?" Hikari murmured faintly. "You mean… we're not… in the forest any more? We went… into… your hat?"

"Better than being fried to death." Shishi struggled to her feet, rubbing her stiff body as she sent her uncle a rueful grimace. "But that was a pretty crappy landing, Chichiri… where did you dump us down, anyway? Are we even still in Kounan?"

"Kahou, I think." Chichiri pursed his lips, glancing around him. "I was aiming for Eiyou, but it was a bit rushed and I couldn't be as accurate as I wanted. But I'm pretty sure this is Kahou… so we've come a good way south. A long way from the river, anyway."

"I wonder if he got burnt." Jin reflected, holding out a hand to pull Hikari to her feet, and she took it gratefully, raising a hand to her head as the world swam.

"I feel kinda ropey." She admitted. "That was…"

She swallowed hard, and Chichiri eyed her keenly.

"I know. Not the best flight I've ever done." He agreed. "I apologise, Hikari-chan. It was the best I could manage, in the circumstances."

"And this is Kahou, all right." Tasuki said wryly. "You have a shitty habit of dumping people in places they don't want to be, Chichiri — but I guess anywhere's better than in the woods with a mad assassin, right?"

"I know, I'm sorry, but that was my thinking too." Chichiri nodded his head. "I don't know if he was bluffing about the poison in his arrow-heads, or if he wasn't. But I didn't think we should risk it. If he

could really penetrate my barrier…"

He shrugged.

"Better we all got out of there as fast as we could." He added. "Eiyou is about a two hour ride from here, so we're a lot closer to the capital than we were a few minutes ago. Tonight, we'll find an inn hereabouts if we can. It is late, but not so late as all that. And I think we'll be safer under a roof."

"Who *was* that man, though?" Hikari asked faintly. "And why… why did he want the earring so badly he was willing to kill for it?"

"Kutou's payin' him, probably." Tasuki pulled a face. "People will do some low things for money, Hikari. And he was vermin… that was clear enough. He looked like he might've been sent by someone from Kutou, based on that evidence."

"What concerns me more is how he was able to hide from me." Chichiri admitted. "I don't think it was my power that was at fault. I mean, I did feel that he was there. But… when that arrow came… I couldn't sense him at all."

"And when he jumped down in front of us? Could you then?" Tasuki asked. Chichiri nodded.

"Once we could see him, yes. But by then it was a bit pointless." He said, frustration in his expression. "I can't think how to explain it. Suppressing chi isn't as easy as all that… and if he was as confident as he seemed about his ability to pierce the barrier — that must be what he was doing. That somehow he's able to hide himself."

"Could being an assassin make him able to do that? If he'd done enough sneaking around?" Jin wondered. Chichiri shrugged.

"I don't know. I wouldn't have thought so." He admitted. "When I first sensed him, his life force was strong… but then it dissipated into nothing in an instant. I guess a covert lifestyle might attune someone to concealing themselves more easily. But…"

"But not generally from Chichiri." Tasuki said grimly. "We need to be careful, that's what you're saying, isn't it? Because chances are we'll see him again… and have to deal with him, again. If he's that good, I doubt my fire even touched him. And if he's set on the Shinzahou… shouldn't we head to Eiyou tonight, not hang on here till tomorrow? Surely the sooner it's at the palace…?"

"Tasuki, we have an assassin tailing us even within our own lands for this." Chichiri's fingers slipped into the folds of his outfit, bringing

out the small black case and glancing at it for a moment, before returning it to its hiding place. “That being so, I’m not taking it to the palace just yet. Do you think Hotohori-sama would forgive either of us if we made his son a target for a man like this Miramu?”

“And if he’s willing to knock us off for money, he won’t stall at an Emperor.” Tasuki admitted. “You got a point.”

“So what do we do, then?” Hikari asked uncertainly.

“I’m thinking on that.” Chichiri admitted. “Whether we’re going to Eiyou, or back to Reikaku-zan, or what, right at the moment. We’ve travelled a long way now, and he won’t be able to cross that ground in a single night, no matter how good he is at concealing his life force from prying senses. So we should get something to eat, and rest, and then we’ll deal with it in the morning. The fact he came right to us suggests he may have been able to sense us, Tasuki — he knew you and I both by more than just name, so that’s something we have to take into consideration… that if this is Kutou’s doing, they’re more aware of us than we thought.”

“I have’ta admit, he didn’t *look* like he was from Kutou, even though his sucky attitude fit the bill just fine.” Tasuki reflected. “His eyes were weird. Did you notice that? I don’t know what it is about weird eyes an’ psychopaths, but sure as hell there was somethin’ in his when he was lookin’ at us.”

“If he’s a hired assassin, it doesn’t matter where he’s from. He’ll do the bidding of the one who pays the most money.” Chichiri said grimly. “And I’m pretty sure we haven’t seen the last of him.”

“Well, for now we should find somewhere to get a meal, and a room.” Tasuki said with a sigh. “So long as it ain’t… *that* place, I ain’t got any preferences about where.”

“*That* place?” Shishi stared at her father, who shot her a rueful grimace in return.

“None of your business, squirt.” He said evenly, and something in his tone sparked Hikari’s curiosity, distracting her momentarily from the peril they had faced.

“You’ve been to Kahou before, then?” She asked softly.

“Your father and Tasuki had a minor battle of fire and fists in one of the inns hereabouts, and caused a little bit of damage.” Chichiri said casually. “I doubt that the landlord would welcome Tasuki back, even after this long — I told you, it’s the danger of trusting teenagers with deadly weapons… especially when you add alcohol to the mix.”

He shrugged, meeting Tasuki's gaze, and as a look passed between them, Hikari saw a flicker of gratitude flare in the bandit's bronze eyes. He nodded.

"Which is why we ain't goin' back." He added. "We'll find someplace else. Kahou's a biggish city. There must be somewhere we can go."

"Hikari, are you all right?" Jin cast her a concerned glance, and Hikari raised her eyes to his dark ones, managing a feeble smile.

"I… think so." She agreed. "Just… that guy shot his arrow right near me, and it was full of poison… I never… I thought… noone's ever tried to kill me before, and I…"

"Suboshi gave it a pretty good shot, didn't he?" Shishi reminded her. Hikari spread her hands.

"But when that happened, it was like… instinct." She said helplessly. "This time I was… it was different."

"Well, don't think about it any more." Chichiri advised her. "We know what we're dealing with now, and the most important thing is that he didn't seem to know who you were or anything about you. He barely cast you a glance, except to make threats. He was looking for Tasuki and I, as Seishi. Not Suzaku no Shinzahou. Which means whoever he's working for, he doesn't know that that's who you are. If he comes back, it will probably be us he'll clash with… and now we know he's around, we'll be sure to keep you as much out of the way as we can… all three of you."

"I'll look after you too, I promise." Jin added. "After all, that's why I came along, isn't it? To look out for you an' for Shishi."

"An' I don't need it as much as you do, Hiki." Shishi added. Hikari sent her a wan smile.

"I suppose." She agreed. "It was just so sudden. That's all."

"I suppose you couldn't feel this guy being there either, Hikari?" Jin asked, and at the question, Hikari looked surprised, shaking her head.

"No… why?"

"Well, after you sensed Chichiri-san before, I wondered if it was something you could do all the time, or…"

"You *sensed* me?" Chichiri started at this, grabbing the girl by the shoulders as he met her confused gaze with a startled one of his own.

“Hikari-chan — is that how you came after Tasuki and I when we were facing Suboshi? You sensed my chi — you followed my life force to where I was?”

“I… guess I did.” Hikari nodded, bewildered now. “I knew you were tired, and fighting, and… calling for help from Suzaku. But… I guess… you just got me.”

Chichiri’s eyes widened, and he turned to glance at Tasuki, who shrugged his shoulders.

“Suzaku no Shinzahou.” He said simply. “An’ you said you couldn’t draw on her for strength, Chichiri. Guess you were wrong.”

“Maybe.” Chichiri turned his gaze back on Hikari, who bit her lip.

“Did I do something bad?” She asked hesitantly. Chichiri shook his head.

“No.” He told her gently. “Quite the opposite. I’d already realised that you were probably drawn to the other Shinzahou, but that you were also drawn to me when I was using my power like that… that’s what woke it inside of you, knowing we were in danger?”

“Yes. I think so.” Hikari nodded.

“It’s all on instinct at the moment, but I think we’re starting to see flickers of your true power, Hikari-chan.” Chichiri said softly, patting her on the shoulder. “Promise me that you’ll try and do that again — sense my life force, or Tasuki’s… can you do that for me? Even now we’re not fighting… can you try?”

“I… don’t know what I’m sensing for.” Hikari admitted. “I did try to… well… focus on you when I was with Koutaku-san, but all that did was bring that stupid ghost to hover over me like God knows what. Is that what you mean?”

“Probably. Somewhat.” Chichiri nodded. “Well. For tonight… we’ll let it go. But tomorrow, Hikari — I want you to practice this some more. On finding Tasuki and I when we’re not in the same room. All right? Will you do that for me?”

“Of course.” Hikari looked surprised. “If it’s important, then I’ll try.”

“Good girl.” Chichiri grinned at her. “And now that’s settled, let’s do as Tasuki says and find somewhere to spend the night. Whatever Kutou are up to, and whatever that Miramu’s agenda, we still have custody of two Shinzahou and we’re a lot deeper into Kounan now than we were before. I think we can probably rest easy tonight, at the

very least. Tomorrow we'll work out what we're doing next… with both Seiryuu *and* Suzaku no Shinzahou!"

So, the direct approach had failed.

Miramu curled himself up against the wall of the old farmhouse, surveying the scorched riverside landscape ruefully as he pondered on the confrontation. A faint smile touched his face as he remembered the unsuspecting people he had overpowered, quizzed and killed on his way south, drawing on their tales of Suzaku's legend as well as their geographic knowledge to navigate the peaceful Southern lands.

He had gleaned much information from these random attacks — enough, he had felt, to face the Suzaku Seishi with some confidence. And, having learnt from residents of Choukou that one of them was a northerner by birth, he had bet — correctly — on the fact that the travellers would use the fast-flowing Shouryuu river as a point of navigation. He had been prepared for Tasuki's fire, knowing he was swift enough to dart out of the way so long as he did not let his guard down. And he had located and tracked their energy across several hills and fields, finding his patience borne out as he had finally pinned them down outside the old, abandoned farmhouse.

And yet, he had still miscalculated one thing.

"The sorcerer. Chichiri." He reflected aloud, gazing up at the moon overhead as he made out the stars of Suzaku. "I didn't realise his power stretched so far as that… I expected barriers and spells, but not that he could take them all out of this place and out of my range of vision completely. Careless of me… and I thought I knew all I needed to know about Suzaku's surviving warriors."

He put an absent hand to his throat, fingering the thick leather collar that covered his flesh from view. It had acted as a shield against knives and arrows in the past, but at that moment, it was something else that crossed his mind as he brushed his fingers against the character for 'shadow.' For a brief moment a sense of emptiness and nostalgia flickered through him, then he frowned, struggling to steady his thoughts as he refocused his attention on the matter at hand. After all, he told himself bitterly, it was only a matter of money. Life, death, oblivion — it had all translated into cold, hard cash.

"If I must live this life, so I will live it, till the time comes for me to meet Byakko's final judgment." He muttered. "And whilst I do so, I will make what I can from it too. At least this way I'm making my own decisions."

His eyes narrowed in resolution as he slid his hand into the folds of his dark clothing, pulling out the small fabric pouch that even now showed the dust and grime of a life constantly lived on the go. He unrolled it carefully, tipping the contents out onto his hand and separating the stems idly with his fingernail. As he glanced at the herb which flourished in the dry desert land of his birth, more images teased at his senses and he scowled, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"Enough." He muttered, taking one of the stems and putting it between his teeth, wincing slightly at the acrid taste as he dropped the remaining plant matter back into the pouch. Returning it to his pocket, he leant back against the wall with a sigh, closing his eyes as he forced his memories back into their proper place, concentrating instead on the best way to carry out his next move. As he sat there, the herb's effect began to creep over his senses little by little, and his scattered thoughts became clearer and more concise in his mind as he drummed his fingers impatiently on the ground.

"Those Seishi are no more than Suzaku's slaves, and I despise them for it." He whispered. "For not being strong enough to break free of his command. They're lauded as heroes across this land, and yet, in truth, they're nothing but meat for the sacrificial fire of their Beast God. If he commands them to die, they'll do so without a moment's thought. That attitude sickens me. They deserve to be taken out, with a mentality like that. And if they're so keen to defend this Shinzahou they stole with their lives, I'll be more than happy to oblige them. But still… Chichiri…"

He paused, biting his lip as he considered the problem.

"He truly *is* a shadow, just as I am." He murmured. "But that's all right. I know, now. And next time it won't be so easy… in fact, next time, I'll use it to my own advantage."

He got to his feet, spitting out the well-chewed remains of the herb stem onto the grass and scooping up his quiver of arrows as he glanced carefully over the remaining barbs. Most of them were normal fighting weapons that any soldier might carry with him into battle, but three or four bore the distinctive arrow-heads that he had modified himself, and as he gazed at them, a slight smile touched his lips.

"I won't waste my poison on chasing ghosts." He decided. "If the direct approach doesn't work, well, I'll find another way. The men of Suzaku are known in Sairou, too — and I've learnt enough of them to know that they have weaknesses as well as strengths. It's time I resorted to other methods. Kikei did say I should do as I had to, to

retrieve the Shinzahou. And I like a challenge. Besides, I gave him my word I wouldn't fail. And I have no intention of coming second best to Celestial Warriors of *any* deity!"

He slipped his quiver back onto his shoulder, glancing at his hands as he contemplated the situation.

"Time has passed." He mused, his unusual eyes narrowing. "The warriors lack their comrades, but travel with mere children. One of them had red hair and bronze eyes — a cub, perhaps, to the wolf of Reikaku-zan. I wonder… surely family ties among the Suzaku are strong, in this land of peace. To attack Tasuki's get whilst both he and Chichiri are around to defend her — that would be foolish, since I know now that Chichiri need only spirit them away. I can no longer sense where he is — or how far he has taken them in one night. But I do know that their loyalties and connections surround that mountain — that blessed mountain full of bandits. And if Tasuki has family there… maybe Chichiri does too. Perhaps… if they won't accept my offer face to face, they'll do so when I add a little pressure to the equation."

His lips curled into a smile, and he slowly nodded his head, as he slipped back into the shadows from whence he had come, renewed energy coursing through his veins at the thought of a confrontation to come.

"Careless, to leave your homes and families so unprotected whilst you run around the countryside stealing other nations' relics." He whispered. "You'll pay for that oversight, I guarantee it. This game isn't played yet… if you want to up the stakes, that suits me fine. I will take Seiryuu's Shinzahou from you — you will regret not having given it up sooner, by the time I'm done with you, Suzaku Shichi Seishi!"

Chapter 13

Chapter Twelve

“We were lucky, you know. We found two rooms for the night at real short notice.” Shishi perched on the windowsill of the small, simply furnished chamber, gazing out at the still busy city streets below.

“And when the landlord realised he was entertaining Shichi Seishi, he put on the meal and board for free. Which means we’ve still got money to buy food tomorrow if Chichiri makes us ride, rather than hat-hop. All’s good in the end, don’t you think, Hiki?”

“Not if I have to get on a horse.” Hikari shuddered, shaking her head, and Shishi laughed.

“It’s cool. You can ride with me. I’ve been ridin’ since I was six.” She said glibly. “Aniue taught me how. He said no bandit Kashira’s ever goin’ to be taken seriously if he — or she — can’t manage a horse.”

“Well, I don’t really want to learn.” Hikari admitted.

“You are weird, you know.” Shishi reflected, sitting back against the window glass as she contemplated. “One minute you’re brave as hell, next you’re cowerin’ like a wimp an’ looking like you’re about to throw up. I can’t make you out… which are you, Hiki? Coward or heroine?”

“Right now, neither. Just homesick and fed up.” Hikari sighed. “That guy… do you think he really did have poison in his arrows, Shishi?”

“Yes.” Shishi nodded. “He didn’t look like the kind of man who’d lie about something like that.”

“No… I suppose not.” Hikari shivered. “Sorry. It just shook me some. That’s all.”

“Well, Kashira an’ Chichiri won’t let anything happen to you. Jin or me, neither.” Shishi said reflectively. “We mightn’t be Shichi Seishi, Hiki, but we’ll do our best anyhow. Since you are Shinzahou, we gotta do what we gotta do.”

“Just because I’m Shinzahou, huh?” Hikari sighed. “I guess that

makes sense."

"Now what's bugging you?" Shishi looked startled. "I'm not yellin' at you any more… why the long face about it?"

Hikari didn't answer at first, and frustration flickered in the young bandit's bronze eyes.

"Hiki, will you spit it out already? Sheesh! You drive me crazy when you look like that."

"Why *do* you call me that, Shishi?"

"Huh?" Shishi was floored, eying her companion in bewilderment. "What now?"

"Hiki." Hikari murmured. "Why do you call me that? I mean… why, all of a sudden?"

"I dunno." Shishi pursed her lips. "Does it bother you that much, if I do?"

"No I… I kind of like it." Hikari admitted. "Noone ever did call me Hiki before. My closest friend back home, she calls me Hikari or Hi-chan. My parents have always called me Hikari. It just… it sounds a little funny, but… nice, too. Like… we're becoming friends, or something."

"Ain't we?" Shishi looked confused. "I thought we were."

"You just said you'd protect me because I'm Shinzahou."

"And?" Shishi demanded. "That means we can't be friends as well? Yeesh, you don't half read crap into things, you know that?"

She scrambled off the sill, casting her companion a resigned grin.

"I was mean to you to begin with, and I'm sorry I was, now." She added. "Because I was jealous you had grabbed Kashira's attention, an' Chichiri's, an' everyone's. Plus I was sneakin' out, when I found you — bringin' you back to the mountain got me yelled at by Okaasan too. I didn't like you much for that, either. But it's different, now. After what happened in Makan, I don't think you're such a wimp any more, not really. An' I know you are Shinzahou — I mean, that Kashira an' Chichiri aren't playin' favourites. So I don't mind, if you want to be friends. It's okay by me."

Hikari's eyes widened, then she grinned.

"Chichiri and Tasuki are kind to me, but they're not my family. Not really." She owned. "I miss my home a lot at the moment. It's nice to

have people who I can trust around — I'm sorry if I was monopolising them. I guess… I am selfish, sometimes. I mean, it didn't… I guess I'm trying not to think just about me, at the moment. Because every time I do, and think I want to go home, I remember seeing Meikyo and Eiju dead. And… I can't get past that… that's why I'm still here."

"You really saw it, huh? The end of this world?" Shishi asked gravely, and Hikari nodded.

"Before you found me." She agreed. "It was awful… like a wasteland. *Everything* was dead, even the trees. It scared me… it still does. Especially finding Chichiri's family and then, realising who they were…"

She spread her hands, and Shishi saw genuine apprehension in her companion's dark eyes.

"I had to try and stop it." She whispered, her voice trembling slightly. "Even if Mum and Dad don't forgive me for not going home. I couldn't let it happen to them… they're so innocent and I just… I couldn't."

"Your Ma is Suzaku no Miko, an' your Pa is Tamahome. If anyone'd understand, it'd be them, right?" Shishi dropped down beside her friend, sending her a rueful grin. "Don't cry, Hiki, please. I don't know what to do with people who weep an' wail."

"I'm trying." Hikari admitted, although Shishi was relieved to see a faint smile touch her companion's lips at this. "I just… if I'd come here without having fought with my family, I don't think I'd feel so bad. As it is…"

"What was it you did that was so bad, anyhow?" Shishi demanded, and Hikari shook her head.

"It doesn't matter."

"It does if it's botherin' you an' makin' you blub." Shishi said bluntly. "Jus' tell me already. I told you it can't be bad as all that… not considerin' who you are, an' all. So tell me. All right? Tell me."

Hikari dropped her gaze.

"I took some money… from my uncle's purse." She murmured, and Shishi's eyes opened wide.

"You're a *sneak-thief*?"

"Not a very good one." Hikari rubbed her temples. "I didn't mean it as stealing, though I guess I… I know it was. Mother caught me in the

act. I was only going to borrow it — I wanted to buy… something and I didn't have any money to do it. And… Arina said…"

"Arina?"

"My best friend, back in my world." Hikari responded. "She said it would be okay — just to borrow it, and pay it back when I had the money. It was… for a party — to buy a dress. For… a guy I liked. I guess… but it was a bad thing to do. And now I feel pretty crap about it, but I can't even tell them so. After that Miramu guy attacked us — what if he gets us before I can go home and tell them? I can really die in this world — can't I?"

"Shit, of course you can. Did you really not realise that?" Shishi stared at her, half-wondering if her new ally was mad. "An' as for your friend, she sounds like a real bitch to me, if she pushed it on you to do somethin' underhand like that. You need better friends, that's for sure."

"But you're a bandit, Shishi." Hikari sent her companion a pensive glance. "Don't you ever feel bad — knowing that your people steal for a living? I mean you say that about Arina, but…"

"It ain't the same." Shishi said firmly. "We don't steal. We take toll. An' the proceeds don't go to us. I mean, we got enough to live on, an' all — but we ain't rich — none of us are. Kashira's real strict about this kind of thing. What we take ain't our money — it goes to the villages hereabouts. Some o' them are real poor, especially in the winter. What we collect helps them survive an' buy food in Souun or from other villages. That's why we do what we do. It ain't for selfish reasons. To cross Reikaku-zan, you gotta pay the toll. So. Anyone who does knows they either pay up willingly or it gets taken by force."

"I see." Hikari seemed to be digesting this. "So in fact, you're like a charity organisation, really — you're providing for those who don't have enough."

"I guess. Whatever that means."

Hikari sighed.

"So I guess you've nothing to feel bad about, then. Do you?"

"Nope." Shishi shook her head. "Reikaku-zan bandits are different from all other bandits, anyhow. The mountain is blessed — it judges you as soon as you step onto it. It reads the kind of person you are — there ain't no hidin' from it. Maybe it's because that relic thing is buried deep down — I don't know. But that's still how it is. We're different."

She held out a hand, grasping her companion's fist in hers.

"But you're sorry you did somethin' so shitty to your uncle now, right?"

"Yes…"

"Then it ain't like you're a *real* sneak-thief… I'm glad about that." Shishi grinned at her. "Because you don't seem like the thief type to me. You jus' did somethin' stupid, an' that I *can* believe, because you *are* kinda stupid, sometimes."

"Shishi!" Hikari protested, but there was a glitter of humour in her dark eyes, and Shishi nodded her head.

"Forget about it till you get home." She said frankly. "But listen. Miramu ain't goin' to kill you. You heard Chichiri — he's interested in Seishi an' I don't think either Kashira or Chichiri will let him get the better of them. So you're safe enough, really. Especially so deep into Kounan. So you will get home, you can explain an' if your folks are like the stories I've always heard, they'll understand. It'll be fine… jus' don't let that friend o' yours talk you into doin' stupid shit in the future, huh? Friends don't land one another in trouble, after all… you better go tell her that, when you get home."

"Maybe." Hikari acknowledged. She sighed.

"I've been here almost a week." She added. "But it feels like forever. Like even if I go back to my world, I don't feel like I did before I left it. Is that stupid?"

"No, guess not." Shishi shook her head. "And hey, at least, when you do go back — your parents will have to believe you. Right? Since they came here too. In fact, they probably know where you are an' it's all all right already. Wouldn't surprise me… Suzaku no Miko's involved, after all, an' she did summon Suzaku."

Hikari bit her lip, but she did not answer, and Shishi eyed her keenly.

"This guy you like — was it worth it?" She asked softly, and Hikari gazed at her in surprise. She shrugged.

"Don't know." She admitted. "He doesn't even know I'm alive. But the stupid thing is, since I came here… I haven't thought about him once. So maybe I don't like him so much as I thought I did. Maybe I was just being silly… I really don't know. Truth is, I've never had a boyfriend before, or even really been interested in guys."

"Me either." Shishi snorted. "It's a waste of time. Okaasan said she

was seventeen, when she came to live with Papa on the mountain — but that she was your age when she first decided she loved him. She tells me that in a couple of years I might feel different — but I don't think I will. It's not that I hate boys, or being a girl. I just don't have time for any of it. I'm goin' to be a bandit Kashira one day, an' I can't be wastin' time chasin' stupid romance stories. It just ain't me — it's not the way I am."

"That's sort of refreshing." Hikari admitted. "In my world, there's so much pressure to be that kind of girl. To, you know, have a boyfriend, and look pretty and in fashion and… all those kinds of things. And then there's school and entrance exams and everything else, too. Being a teenager there is hard work — in a totally different way from being one in this world, Shishi. You're the first girl I've ever met who doesn't care about appearance or boys or make-up or all those things. And to begin with I thought it was… weird. But now I'm starting to find I like it that way."

"It's dumb, is all." Shishi shrugged. "You're fifteen. You might live till you're ninety. Why worry about gettin' hitched to someone now? Waste of time an' life, I call it."

"Arina is really pretty." Hikari said sadly. "And next to her I always feel inferior. She's bright and sparky and popular and everyone loves her. In comparison, I'm just… sort of there. So I've always tried to live up to her, and I've never really managed."

She sighed, putting her chin in her hands as she stretched out on the low-slung bed.

"You're really pretty too, you know." She said absently. "But I don't feel the same way about it with you, because you don't care about it either way. You care about different things… and I'm sort of learning that those things are important too. That I'm not 'just there', not in this world. In this world I'm learning how to be something else, and it doesn't matter what I look like or any of that. It's weird to get my head around… but I think it's true."

"You think I'm pretty?" Despite herself, Shishi was startled, and Hikari nodded.

"Yes." She agreed. "And you were right — Shishi *is* your name, not Karin. You *are* like a lion cub, just like your father is a wolf."

She glanced at her hands.

"I wish I was able to control this power I supposedly have." She added wistfully. "Then I could be more useful to everyone, couldn't

I?"

"Well, you should do what Chichiri said." Shishi recovered herself, offering a grin. "Try and practice. See if you can find his chi. He's not here right now, so see if you can do it."

"But I know where he is."

"So? Then you'll know if you're right or not, won't you?" Shishi pointed out. Hikari sighed, but nodded her head, closing her eyes as she creased her brows in concentration. Despite herself Shishi giggled at the funny expression on her friend's face, and Hikari's eyes snapped open indignantly.

"What?"

"You look like you ate somethin' rotten." Shishi chuckled. "Or smelt somethin' funny, pullin' a face like that."

"Shut up! You'll make me self-conscious!" Hikari objected. "Pipe down, all right? It's not easy. It feels funny enough, trying to do this… I don't even really know what I'm looking for."

"Well, then focus on whatever it was you felt when you knew they were in trouble, in Makan." Shishi suggested. "Can you do that?"

"I can try, I guess." Hikari bit her lip. "It all happened kind of suddenly, but… maybe. If I really… concentrate hard…"

She trailed off, screwing up her face once more, and Shishi smirked, crossing the chamber and dropping down onto her own modest bedcovers as she watched her new friend wrestle with the elusiveness of her Suzaku power. For a moment there was silence, and then the schoolgirl let out a gasp, opening her eyes as she met Shishi's quizzical look with a triumphant one of her own.

"Well?" Shishi arched an eyebrow, and Hikari offered her a grin, nodding her head.

"I *did* it!" She exclaimed. "It was only faint, and only for a moment… but I could feel where he was. It was like my brain was suddenly engulfed in red light, or something — and in the light I could see… I could see Chichiri. Just about. He was there… just like he was in Makan."

"Red light again, huh?" Shishi pursed her lips. "Oh well. He'll be pleased, anyhow. It means you're starting to use your powers yourself, right? That can't be a bad thing."

"I guess not." Hikari's eyes shone with pride. "So I'll keep

practicing, and maybe by the morning I'll be able to sense Tasuki's chi as well!"

Well, so they were finally back in Kutou.

Hyoushin paused outside the entrance to the throne room, pursing his lips as he considered what might have happened in the palace in his absence. Kintsusei's words about Kikei's agent still echoed in his thoughts and his brow furrowed, inwardly hoping that the decision would not prove costly for Kutou in the long run.

"Hyoushin-sama." The guard on duty bowed his head at the Meihi's approach, and Hyoushin acknowledged it with a slight inclination of his own.

"Kintsusei-sama has retired for the night? Or is he still awake?" He asked softly. "I realise the hour, but I feel I should make report to him on our mission to Hokkan as soon as possible."

"The Emperor is within, Sir." The guard said respectfully. "Shall I tell him that you're here?"

"Yes. Do." Hyoushin nodded. "And… Lord Kikei? Is he also on hand?"

"Lord Kikei has retired, Commander." The guard shook his head, and a flicker of relief stirred in Hyoushin's heart even as he offered the guard an even smile.

"Then I shall save my reunion with him for the morning. No doubt it will keep." He said lightly. "Inform the Emperor of my presence… I won't keep him waiting if I can avoid it."

"Yes, sir. At once, sir."

The guard bowed again, then swung back the door, disappearing inside. A moment later the wood was flung fully back, and Hyoushin stared in surprise as the Emperor himself emerged, relief on his tired features as he hurried to clasp his friend's hands in his.

"Hyoushin! I didn't expect you till the morning at the earliest!"

"The men sensed home was near, and all preferred to keep riding rather than seek shelter so close to the capital." Hyoushin responded, gathering his composure in a moment and shooting his companion a level smile. "I suppose that the lure of familiar surroundings and secure barracks drove them on. And I was eager to make my report to you as soon as possible, my Lord… if it is not too late to be troubling

you with such matters."

"No… I wasn't sleeping, anyway." Kintsusei admitted. "I've not been able to, much, since Suiko said that Kounan had custody of the Shinzahou. I can't imagine why they'd want it, except to cause us harm… and we can ill afford another war with the South."

"Indeed not." Hyoushin's expression became grave, as the Emperor led them through the halls to his private study, closing the door behind them. "And that concerns me, also. Either Kounan have learnt of my Lord's attempts to retrieve it, and fear some kind of confrontation is brewing — in which case, we should be very careful, I feel, not to excite their paranoia. After all, in this, history is against us… Kutou were hostile to Kounan once in the past, and they may think a repeat is due."

"And otherwise?"

"Otherwise, they already seek to cause us harm, by taking custody of our Shinzahou." Hyoushin said simply. Kintsusei nodded.

"Yes. Quite."

"My Lord, if I may be so bold to ask…" Hyoushin hesitated, then met his companion's gaze with an impassive one of his own. "Kikei-sama's man that you have dispatched to Kounan — is it the assassin, Geiyo Miramu?"

Shock flickered across the Emperor's expression, and he nodded.

"Yes… why? You know of the man?"

"Unfortunately, I have made his acquaintance on a couple of occasions." Hyoushin's lips thinned. "However, I understood he worked from time to time to suit Lord Kikei's bidding. I did not realise he was also on the Emperor's business. Perhaps that was an oversight of mine."

"No… this is the first time I've entrusted anything to him." Kintsusei admitted. "To be honest, Hyoushin, I have reservations about it, and I can tell by the way you ask that you have some, too. He is… not the kind of man in whom I usually put my faith. But, old friend, as you've so rightly pointed out — relations with Kounan continue to be tentative and strained. I would have sent you, but I don't want you to come to harm and I don't want to excite a conflict with our southern neighbours. Miramu is a man of the West, and Kikei has faith in him to carry out his orders to the letter. There is no direct link to Kutou in his going… and I decided this was a safer strategy."

Hyoushin did not answer, and Kintsusei frowned.

“You don’t think so?”

“I don’t know.” Hyoushin admitted. “And it is not my place to judge the decisions of Emperors.”

“Hyoushin, if you’ve something to say, I’d like you to say it.” Kintsusei said softly. “There is noone else here… you don’t have to persist in your formality.”

Hyoushin pursed his lips.

“Geiyo Miramu is an efficient agent, and he does indeed do as he is bidden.” He said at length. “However, he has a certain blood-lust for violence, and he is not averse to killing people who get in his way. I am not a fan of that mentality… nor am I confident that Reizeitei-sama is oblivious enough not to notice if someone slays those who are close to his seat of power.”

“I have already told Miramu that I don’t want blood spilled in the obtaining of Yui-sama’s treasure.” Kintsusei assured him. “That he’s to retrieve it, but that is all. I think the same way you do… that killing Suzaku’s Shichi Seishi would be a problem, if it got traced back to us.”

“We have no reason to slay men of the Phoenix.” Hyoushin said evenly. “And Miramu’s methods are despicable on occasion. He does not fight fair odds, my Lord.”

“Meaning?” Kintsusei looked startled, and Hyoushin’s lip curled.

“His speciality is an arrow dipped deep in some nefarious poison only he knows the composite for.” He said softly. “He is no soldier, but a killer in the night. I do not like how he works… it goes against all you trained me to be, when I first came into your service.”

“I’m not totally happy about the nature of his profession, either.” Kintsusei acknowledged. “But I’m desperate. And Kikei trusts him.”

“That is no surprise to me, my Lord.”

“There it is again.” Kintsusei glanced at his pale-skinned companion. “Censure in your tones when Kikei’s name is mentioned… even though you try to conceal it.”

“Well, I imagine Lord Kikei and I are never going to be any closer acquaintances than we are now.” Hyoushin said, irony glittering in his amethyst eyes.

“Do you think Miramu will fail, Hyoushin?”

“No, my Lord.” Hyoushin shook his head. “I believe he will succeed. I just wonder at the cost of his doing so.”

“Well, we’ll have to hope for the best.” Kintsusei said frankly. “Tell me instead about Hokkan — about what you discovered there.”

“Nothing of use, except that Ashitare has not been reborn in any form, human or other.” Hyoushin’s expression flickered with brief frustration. “And that is all. We travelled to the cave where I believe he was slain by a warrior of Suzaku. One of their own is buried there, protected by a crimson barrier. But there is no Shinzahou, and also, we saw no sign of Suzaku’s men while we were there either.”

“How could they have got there and found it more quickly than we could?” Kintsusei wondered out loud. “Almost as if they knew… almost as if… as if…”

“As if they had some inside information that we do not?” Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed. “Is that possible? Kounan and Kutou were enemies, were they not?”

“Yes.” Kintsusei admitted. “And yet… they must have travelled directly to the place they felt it was held. And succeeded, too. They didn’t go to Touran, or you’d have seen them. So… they must have known something.”

“Are you suggesting that we should be sending a spy into Kounan, my Lord?” Hyoushin asked softly. Kintsusei frowned, then, slowly, he shook his head.

“Let’s wait and see what Miramu brings us first.” He reflected. “And how easily he manages to get the treasure from the men of the South. Then, maybe, we’ll think again on that subject. It might be… necessary, but for now, we won’t risk it. The men who are completely loyal are few, and too precious to be easily wasted… and such a mission would be dangerous.”

“Yes, my Lord. Indeed it would.” Hyoushin’s eyes flickered slightly, and he nodded his head. “Very well. As you wish.”

“All the men came back with you safely? There were no mishaps on the journey?”

“All are safe and well, Kintsusei-sama.” Hyoushin agreed.

“I suppose it was a long shot, sending Aoiketsu with you — I imagine even he had no luck in tracing any clues?”

“No…” Hyoushin shook his head. “At least, he and Maichu did ferret out information when we were in Touran — but in the end it

amounted to nothing. Still, I am determined not to give up on him. I feel he has more to give Kutou, yet… if he can only overcome his own sensitivities and harden his resolve in situations of conflict."

"Yes, I agree with you." Kintsusei nodded his head. "And we did promise Lady Ruiren to do that by her son. That we'd make him a soldier, and have him fight to defend Kutou against enemies."

"He is still curious." Hyoushin admitted. "Before our trip, I caught him at Ruiren-sama's grave. I do not think divulging everything to him a wise course of action — but if he continues to ask questions — if he continues to push for the truth — he may learn more than we anticipate."

"Perhaps, in the end, it is his destiny to know." Kintsusei reflected. "But for now there is no sense in heaping such things on the head of such a young soldier. He has to prove himself as Kaiga Aoiketsu first… isn't that how your line of thought goes?"

"Indeed." Hyoushin inclined his head in agreement. "And I do believe he will do so. He just needs a little more time… that's all."

"Time we may not have." Kintsusei admitted. "But where he's concerned, I've always followed your counsel. And I will continue to do so, Hyoushin."

He sighed.

"I am glad to have you home." He added. "Even with things so uncertain."

"I confess, I was not sorry to leave Hokkan, either." Hyoushin admitted, a faint memory of the mountain Meihi drifting across his thoughts. "And I shall endeavour to put faith in Miramu, as my Emperor has done so. If he can retrieve the Shinzahou without taking us to war… so much the better for Kutou, after all."

"Yes." Kintsusei looked troubled. "Let's hope so. We have enough of a war here already without adding further parties to the equation!"

Chapter 14

Chapter 13

So this was the Eastern Village.

As the sun began to rise over the mountains of Kounan's south-west, Miramu leapt neatly down from his perch atop one of the tall trees surrounding the peaceful mountain settlement, gazing with a thoughtful, roving eye across the cluster of houses and other buildings that had, little by little been resurrected from the fire so many years before. As he stood on the village outskirts, he felt a sense of nostalgia run through him and a rueful smile touched his face as he slowly shook his head.

"One village is as much like another, whether it's the West or the South, I guess." He reflected. "So this is where Chichiri — no, *Ri Hou Jun* — calls home, is it? I suppose I can see the attraction. In the shade of Reikaku-zan…"

He paused, turning to glance behind him as he debated whether or not the body of his latest victim would be discovered before he could locate the Ri home. He had not intended on killing again before reaching the mountains, but as he had gotten closer to Reikaku-zan, he had realised that once more his lack of experience in Kounan's territories demanded further information.

"It's a shame, but I can't leave someone who might talk about me to people I don't want in my way." He reflected with a matter-of-fact shrug, slipping his finger down to his belt as he ran it pensively across the tip of his dagger blade. Though he had wiped it clean, it still seemed to hum with the taint of blood, and he laughed, amused as he remembered how surprised his unsuspecting target had seemed when he had drawn the blade.

"Too quickly for him to really know what was happening." He mused. "The best way, sometimes. Enjoy your oblivion, my friend — as your reward for your help. You don't know how I envy you. However…"

He gazed up at the sky, a bitter smile touching his lips.

"Today is not my day." He murmured aloud. "Today is simply… another day. A day in which to complete a mission and collect a payment."

As he made his way slowly through the gradually stirring settlement, he chewed on his lip, still able to taste the sharpness of the herb against his teeth. It had been his mother who had first taught him the benefits of certain native Sairou plants when he had been a small boy, showing him their medicinal qualities one at a time, but he had long since considered it more than a medicament. The effect of the plant on his concentration and his reflexes had always been significant, especially when he was otherwise tired, and by using it at regular intervals, Miramu had learnt that he did not need to stop or sleep as much as those he hunted down. In its simplest form, the herb had become a business investment, as well as being simultaneously a torture and a comfort to his often shattered mental state, and when he had realised that its alluring taint could enhance his natural abilities, he had ceased to care about such trifling things as side effects.

After all, as he well knew, nothing he could do could end his life. Not yet.

“So instead, I’ll focus on other people’s.” He observed ruefully, as he slipped along the main street that passed directly through the village to the mountain pass. None of the few stirring villagers paid him any attention, and Miramu knew that they would not perceive his presence, no matter how blatantly he walked among them.

“But I may have to ask again, about the Ri family.” He reflected. “And I don’t want to spill blood that I don’t have to spill, if it’s likely to bring witnesses. Noone who’s ever witnessed me kill has ever survived to tell the tale — and I won’t start now by being sloppy. I have enough arrows to suffice, if need be — but if I slaughter a whole village and start a war for Kutou’s nice guy Emperor, Kikei-sama might decide not to pay me. And then it gets messy…”

As he reached the centre of the village, he laid eyes on a sturdily built farm house, and his eyes narrowed as he approached it carefully, running a finger against the stone of the wall as he tried to decide whether he’d found his target.

“Suzaku’s taint.” He murmured, knowing that the herb running through his senses had heightened his tired wits. “Just a trace, but it’s there. A warrior of the stars… I believe I’ve found the place I’m looking for. Well, so much to the good. Chichiri will have regrets enough to fill the whole of that damn hat of his when he realises what his reticence has done to his family. But he was warned — I did tell him that if he didn’t hand it over, someone would die. Just because it wasn’t him or his travel companions…”

He smirked, glancing at the low-slung fence that partitioned the

land, before neatly vaulting it, slipping carefully across the rows of growing plants as he followed the excited sound of children's voices.

"So the sorcerer also grows herbs." He reflected with some amusement. "I could teach him a little about that… although I'm sure he wouldn't want to know how best to mix a formula to knock a man dead within a matter of minutes or hours. He struck me as an annoyingly pro-life person — very boring. He almost deserves the taint of blood in his life, considering that — maybe it'll give him fire to fight, instead of just running away!"

"Oniichan! Oniichan, give it back… *give it back*!"

The voice of a young girl cut across his thoughts at that moment, and he paused, his indigo gaze darting in the direction of the voices as he prepared himself for attack. As he did so, however, he caught sight of a boy of about twelve years old, something clutched in his hands, and then, trailing him, the young speaker, her red hair wild and loose in the wind as she hurried after him.

"Oniichan! Give me back Papa's mask… *Oniichan*!"

"Catch me if you can, and then I'll give it back." The young boy teased, holding it up out of her reach. "Come on, Mei-chan. Or are you giving up already?"

"Oniichan, stop being mean!" The young girl put her hands on her hips, something pre-possessing in her stance despite her tiny, fragile form, and at the sight of them, Miramu drew breath sharply, momentarily struck by the two children who, oblivious to his attention, continued to shout and play within metres of where he stood.

"Aw, you're no fun." The boy dropped what he had been carrying onto the ground, shaking his head with all the authority of one who was older and therefore qualified to pass such judgement. "Since Papa went away, all you've done is fuss and cling onto that thing — I'm not doing all of the weeding today, just because you miss him, you know!"

"I do my share!" The girl objected indignantly, gathering up the precious object in her hands and hugging it tightly to her chest. "I'm just worried 'bout Papa an' Shishi an' Uncle Wolf an' Hikari-neesan, that's all."

"And so's Okaasan, so shut up." The boy told her bluntly, and Miramu's eyes widened as memories flitted across his senses.

"*Stop saying those things — you're just upsetting Mother, imouto-chan*." His own voice, younger and less cynical echoed in his mind, and he

swallowed, shaking his head as if to clear it. "*Nobody wants to hear your stories right now — and besides, I'm not doing all the work on my own*!"

He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath, forcing the sensation back with a muttered curse. His grip tightened around the hilt of his dagger, but his impulse to slay the bickering siblings had dissipated in an instant, and he swore again, this time loudly enough for the young girl to hear him. Her eyes widened at the coarse language, and she raised her head, staring right at where he stood with such an intense, searching gaze that Miramu half wondered if the child had inherited any of her father's unusual abilities after all.

For a moment, nothing moved. Then, in a flash, the spell was broken as, from the farm building, a woman with features enough like Tasuki's to prove them related emerged, wiping her hands on her apron as she cast a reproving look at the two youngsters.

"What are you doing, shrieking like that?" She scolded. "At this time in the morning — do you want to wake the whole village?"

"Kaa-san, the bushes said a bad word." The young girl turned to her mother, confusion in her tones. "Like the things Uncle Wolf says — the things you say we shouldn't copy."

"The *bushes* did?" Miramu froze, half expecting the woman to laugh it off as nonsense, but instead she frowned, gazing across the field. "Into the house, both of you. We'll continue this inside — there's no sense running around the land so early and besides, I have things for both of you to do inside."

"I want to write Papa a letter." As they were ushered into the building, Miramu heard the young girl say. "Can I do that, Kaa-san?"

"We don't know where he is, or how soon he'll be home, Meikyo." The woman shook her head. "And I've far more useful things for you to do than write. I've still laundry to go through — and Eiju, you know that I asked you to check the firewood already. Do you want Papa to come home and find a huge pile in a mess like it is now?"

"Can I use the axe?" The boy sounded hopeful, and his mother snorted.

"You know the answer to that." She said unsympathetically. "Go on with you! Mei-chan, you come with me. Papa can wait — there's far too much to do even if he isn't here to help."

With that they were gone, and Miramu's eyes narrowed as he plotted his strategy.

“The woman is Chichiri’s wife, I suppose.” He muttered. “But she and the little girl both look more like they’re blood to the mountain wolf Tasuki. So Seishi keep these things in the family. All the better. However… to kill them might prove tricky. After all, three people… and all the time a chance of a witness…”

He frowned, not wanting to admit that his conviction was failing him and that he no longer wanted to kill the children.

“I might take out the wench.” He reflected. “But really, all I need is one of the little brats. That should suffice… one of them as a trade for the Shinzahou. Seems they’re a closeknit enough family to be enough of a lever — a hostage might work even better than slitting their throats, in fact. Murder *is* outside my brief, after all — if I can get the earring without spilling Seishi blood, therein lies the challenge. And I do *like* a challenge.”

He poised himself for action, now certain in his own mind as to his course of action.

“One treasure for another.” He whispered. “And Suzaku’s Shichi Seishi will learn that I really do mean business, when I come to call!”

Daybreak, and already the first rays of the climbing sun were beginning to spread over the Kahou city skyscape.

Jin leant up against one of the pillars that marked the front entrance of the dark-stone hotel, folding his arms across his chest as he gazed sightlessly across the slowly stirring town streets. Deep in thought, he did not even realise he had company until a hand came down on his shoulder, and he started, turning to face his companion in surprise.

“Kashira!”

At his reaction, Tasuki chuckled, eying him in some amusement as he nodded his head.

“You’re up early.” He reflected. “An’ starin’ off into space ain’t one of your usual pastimes, neither. Somethin’ bugging you, Jin? Too much Hokkan snow, or too much Kahou alcohol — which is it?”

“I’m all right.” Jin reddened slightly, shooting his companion a rueful grimace. “I just didn’t get much sleep last night. That’s all. So I thought I might as well get up with the sun — mountain habits are hard t’break, after all.”

“Mountain habits, huh?” Tasuki nodded his head. “Guess so. But

we're not on the mountain now, Jin."

"No. We're in Kahou." A faint smile touched Jin's lips. "It's just like I remember it, too, from when I was a kid. Ma used to work just across the road from this quarter — brings back the memories some, comin' through it like this. Seems a long time ago, to tell you the truth."

He sighed, shrugging his shoulders.

"I ain't one for nostalgic musings." He added. "But lookin' at it like this, guess it struck me for a moment. That's all."

"Mm." Tasuki settled himself on the stone wall, fixing his young companion with a searching look. "When I came down, somethin' had struck you. But I doubt it was your ol' ma an' her career in the red light district of Kounan's cities. You ain't spared the woman a thought in twelve years — even comin' here, I don't believe you'd bother with it now."

"Perhaps." Jin glanced at his hands. "Guess I'm just real thoughtful this morning. That's all."

He sighed, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"I ain't been so far from the mountain since you an' Aniki took me in." He added. "It's been a weird trip, this one. Seein' the stuff you an' Chichiri-san can do, it brings it home how important it all is. An' that earring — that someone'd be willin' to kill for it, jus' because it was Seiryuu's."

"You should be used to that, kid. You've survived enough Kaou-zan raids." Tasuki reminded him. Jin nodded.

"I know." He agreed. "But in comparison, bandit squabbles seem kinda lame. I mean, we're dabblin' with Gods an' shit now, aren't we? Holy loot. It's a different level altogether."

"Guess that's true." Tasuki agreed. "I hadn't stopped to think about it, to be honest."

"Well, for you, it's sort of normal, ain't it?" Jin eyed him ruefully. "I'm a rookie, Kashira. Go easy on me, huh?"

Tasuki chuckled, nodding his head.

"I suppose."

"Do you think we're goin' to Eiyou this morning? Or back to the mountain?" Jin shot his companion a quizzical look, and Tasuki shrugged his shoulders.

“Dunno. Chichiri ain’t said anythin’ either way an’ since we’re dealin’ with holy treasures, I’m gonna let him make the final call. I don’t really want it on Reikaku-zan, if there’s some assassin after it too, but we can’t go put the Emperor in danger, so I guess it probably will be the mountains. But we’ll see.”

“Think the girls are awake yet?”

“Probably not. They’re girls, after all.” Tasuki looked amused, and Jin grinned.

“Shishi’s usually around pretty quick in the mornin’, though.” He reflected. “Considerin’.”

“But she’s with Hikari, an’ Hikari’s a girl’s girl.” Tasuki said frankly. “God knows what kind of influence she’s havin’ on the cub… when I passed their room last night, I coulda sworn they were discussin’ hair, so…”

He spread his hands.

“Guess we’ll see.”

“Hikari’ll be going back to her world though, soon. Won’t she?” Jin raised his gaze in the direction of the inn’s many guest rooms, and at his words, Tasuki sent him a sharp look.

“Maybe. Dependin’ on what Taiitsukun thinks about it.” He said cautiously. Jin pursed his lips, and for a moment he didn’t speak. Then he nodded.

“Probably be better if she does. Safer, an’ all, with that Miramu on the loose. She ain’t trained to fight, after all — even if she is plucky an’ she does have fire inside of her. Her magic’s pretty unreliable, after all — an’ if he found out who she was…”

He faltered, and Tasuki’s eyes widened slightly, as if he had just had some kind of revelation. He grinned, getting to his feet and standing beside his young protégée as he followed the boy’s gaze upwards.

“That’s a new one for you, kid.” He said softly. “I ain’t heard that note in your voice before.”

“Huh?” Jin looked startled, turning to gaze at his companion in surprise. “What do you mean, Kashira? What note?”

“The one that says, ‘I want her to be safe but I don’t want her to go back jus’ yet.” Tasuki said baldly. “That one. An’ now you’re turnin’ the colour of Suzaku, so we both know I’m right on the mark, don’t

we? Yeesh, an' you're still such a kid, really — ain't it good enough, bein' a bandit an' collecting toll?"

"I don't know what you mean." Jin got control of his composure, shooting his leader a faint smile. "There's nothing the matter with me. I'm fine."

"Jin, I ain't pretending I understand girls, or how they work or think." Tasuki said bluntly, clapping a hand on his young follower's shoulder and leading him over to the wall, pushing him down onto it as he re-took his former position. "There, stay, where I can see you properly. One thing I do understand is how *men* think. I've lived with an' governed enough of them to know when a man's wantin' a woman, you know. An' a specific woman at that. You've fallen for the young whelp, ain't you? For Hikari."

"I… I don't know about that." Jin looked discomfited. "Kashira, you're jumpin' the gun. I mean, Hikari's not like other girls, she's a Shinzahou — she's from another world. She's different. An' I'm jus' a bandit — besides, she's goin' back, anyway, so it doesn't matter. An' I'm not sure it's as clear-cut as you think… I just… in Makan-mura, she really impressed me. An' spendin' that day in Yukigase, it was like… I don't know. She was one of the gang, not jus' some girl from another plane of existence. It was like it was normal, you know? Spendin' time around her. Like she belonged with Shishi an' me. That's all."

"Well, you oughta put it outta your head." Tasuki advised him. "Whatever it is — undefined or what. Even if it's jus' in the early stages — stifle it now. Hikari will go home eventually — whether now or in the future. An' you don't want to be that screwed up. Besides…"

He frowned, shaking his head.

"Besides, you're too young to be messin' with girls." He reflected. "At least when there's work to be done on Reikaku-zan. Why not take a leaf outta Shishi's book an' forswear the whole business? The mountain family sure don't need any more complications, an' you are part of that family — it ain't like you need to forge another. Right?"

"I guess." Jin rubbed his temples. "I'm sorry. I don't even know how to explain it myself. I suppose I just realised… if she's going home… that I'm going to miss her. And it's dumb, because I ain't known her more'n a week. But maybe it's because she's different… I guess… I can't help feelin' somethin' about it. She was so brave, when she went to save Chichiri-san. Like… like a proper bandit. Like Anzu-sama, or Shishi. But… somehow… different, too."

“Girls from the other world have a funny effect on people, that’s for sure.” Tasuki reflected wisely, and from his expression Jin realised he spoke from experience. “Don’t let it sway you. It’s not a good idea, Jin… trust me. You’ll end up in more trouble than you can handle — take it from me. If you must start playin’ with girls, at least follow one that’s from *this* world, not the other one. It ain’t pretty, watchin’ the fall-out from an inter-dimensional relationship. Tama an’ Miaka were enough… you don’t want to be caught on that path. It’s doomed before you even begin. So whatever you think you feel, stop feelin’ it now. You’ll regret it, otherwise… if you don’t.”

“Guess so.” Jin nodded ruefully. “All right. I’ll try.”

He frowned, eying his superior keenly.

“Kashira…?”

“Yes?”

“When you say that… about girls from the other world… were you… ever… with Miaka-sama?”

“I oughta cuff you for that, considerin’ Miaka’s daughter’s sleepin’ right above us.” Tasuki said evenly, and Jin looked sheepish.

“I know. I’m sorry. But it jus’ sounded like…”

“You think I speak from experience, rather than takin’ my own advice — is that it?” Tasuki eyed him thoughtfully. Then he shook his head. “No. Miaka an’ I had a bond, as Seishi an’ Miko. As friends. As brother an’ sister, maybe. But we were never lovers. Miaka was always Tama’s. And Tama was like a brother to me too.”

“I guess. I’m sorry.” Jin ran his fingers through his hair. “I suppose it was a lot of trouble, then, when Tamahome left this world and went to Miaka-sama’s.”

“More than you want to know, kid.” Tasuki rubbed his chin ruefully. “More’n you want to know. I’m glad it worked out for them — but yeesh, it’s not an experience I’d want to repeat. Or see happen over again to any other poor sucker. So guard against it now, while you still can, okay? Like as not it’s the novelty of bein’ on the road with a woman who you ain’t usually around. Reikaku-zan ain’t exactly a haven for girls an’ I know Shishi’s like your kid sister — maybe that’s just it.”

“Maybe.” Jin reflected. “Either way, I know you’re right. And I’ll try and do as you say, Kashira.”

He faltered, then,

“You won’t tell her, will you?”

“Naw.” Tasuki shook his head. “It ain’t my business an’ believe me, if it involves girls an’ sappy emotions, then it ain’t my scene.”

“But you have Anzu-sama… right?”

“An’ don’t think she didn’t have to prove she was more than just a girl, before I let her stay.” Tasuki grinned wolfishly at the memory. “I didn’t make it easy on her, you know.”

“I guess that wasn’t *too* hard for her to do, though.” Jin mused. “Anzu-sama’s pretty strong… for a chick.”

“She wouldn’t be on Reikaku-zan if she wasn’t.” Tasuki said frankly. “So bear that in mind, too, Jin.”

He eyed his young companion thoughtfully, then shrugged his shoulders.

“You an’ Shishi remind me of Kouji an’ me.” He added. “An’ since you’ve been on the mountain, you’ve been as close to a son as I’ve had, considerin’ how young you were at the time we found you. I’d like t’keep you on the mountain, if I can — for Shishi’s sake as much as for anything. So if you’re goin’ to go after a woman, Jin, try an’ make it one who can survive on Reikaku-zan.”

Jin stared at his companion for a moment. Then he grinned, nodding his head.

“It means something, that.” He said off-handedly. “An’ I’ll do my best to remember.”

His gaze flitted back to the inn, then,

“Maybe if Hikari went back, then, it’d be for the best.” He added. “Outta sight, and all that.”

“Maybe.” Tasuki agreed. “Though if you can’t fight it off yourself, kid, you ain’t the bandit I thought you were.”

“Well, I’m a rookie in this quarter too.” Jin said ruefully. “So I guess that’s two strikes against me on this trip, huh?”

Before the Kashira could respond, there was the sound of someone calling his name and as both men turned they registered Chichiri, a look of apprehension crossing his scarred features as he made his way towards them. As he drew closer, Jin realised that the Seishi was uncharacteristically shaken, and as he joined them, Tasuki grasped him by the wrists, shooting him a confused look.

“What’s eating you?” He demanded. “Jin an’ I ain’t gone anywhere… why that face? Have the girls done somethin’ we should know about?”

“No.” Chichiri shook his head. “At least, I haven’t spoken to either of them this morning. But… we have to leave here, Tasuki. We have to go… back home. Back to the mountain — to the Eastern Village. As soon as possible, or sooner. We have to go.”

“To… go?” Tasuki stared at him. “Why? What’s happened? Did you lose the Shinzahou?”

“It’s not that.” There was an edge of impatience in the older man’s tone, and Tasuki gazed at him in surprise. “I just… something’s wrong. I can feel it. Something’s wrong at home. We have to get back there… right now.”

Tasuki’s expression underwent a transformation and he sent Jin a glance.

“Go wake the girls. Tell them it doesn’t matter how their hair is, or what they’re wearin’, we want them down here pronto.” He said quietly. “You heard Chichiri… we’re goin’ back and we’re not hangin’ around.”

“Yes Kashira.” Jin nodded, realising from his companion’s tones that this was not the time to point out that going into a girl’s bedroom was strictly against the rules on Reikaku-zan. “I’ll be right back… I’ll make sure they know.”

With that he was gone, haring back into the building and up the stairs as he contemplated what could have happened to make the normally relaxed Seishi look so troubled and distressed.

“Something big.” He muttered. “Somethin’ on the mountain, perhaps? Dammit, I hope not. Kaou-zan had better not have chosen now to launch a raid.”

At that moment he reached the right floor, and he pounded on the door of the bedroom the two girls had been sharing.

“Hikari! Shishi! Get out here, now!” He exclaimed. “Kashira’s orders — we’re goin’ and we’re doin’ it now!”

“*What*?” Shishi flung back the door, staring up at him in disbelief. “Right now? We’re not eating breakfast? Hiki’s hardly even up — Jin!”

“It ain’t me, I told you! It’s Kashira… Kashira an’ Chichiri-san!” Jin objected, as Hikari let out a shriek, scrambling for her discarded day

clothing and hiding behind it as she registered his presence in the doorway. “Shit… Hikari, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean… but I think it’s an emergency. I didn’t come to peep on you, I swear — jus’ Chichiri-san looks like he’s seen a ghost, an’ he says something’s happened, back home. We have to go — an’ as soon as possible.”

“Back… home?” Shishi stared at him. “On the mountain?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t say.” Jin spread his hands. “Just that I was to get you girls up an’ hurry you along.”

“It’s Meikyo.” Hikari said softly, sitting down on her bed as she fiddled with the laces of her blouse. “Chichiri… he’s worried about Meikyo. Meikyo, Eiju and Aidou-san.”

Shishi’s eyes widened, and she cursed, shaking her head.

“You don’t think… that bastard assassin… somehow…” She faltered, and Jin’s expression darkened.

“Sooner we go, sooner we’ll find out.” He said grimly. “Hikari, are you ready? We don’t have time to waste.”

“I think so.” Hikari raised troubled dark eyes to his, and despite himself, Jin swallowed hard as he struggled to remember the Kashira’s advice. As he looked at her, with her thick dark hair loose over her shoulders and a plaintive, helpless look in her eyes, he realised that fighting the way he’d begun to feel was going to be more difficult than he’d first imagined, and he gritted his teeth, forcing the thought from his mind.

“You really think it’s his family, huh?” He asked softly. Hikari shook her head.

“I *know* it is.” She whispered. “I can… feel it. Like before. When I try to find Chichiri, I can — but he’s only faint against my senses. But… but when he’s upset, or in trouble… I think… I think it’s instinctive. He reaches for Suzaku’s help… and… and I can feel that, because Suzaku… is inside me, isn’t he? Sort of.”

“Something like that.” Shishi looked angry. “Dammit, if that creep has dared hurt Mei-chan…”

“Well, we won’t know standin’ around here.” Jin said frankly, grabbing her by the arm and holding his other hand out to Hikari. “Let’s hope it’s not as bad as he thinks — and there’s something we can do to help!”

Chapter 15

Chapter Fourteen

"There's still been no news?"

As they mounted the steps of the National Library, Keisuke eyed his companion, a troubled expression crossing his face as he registered the lines of tiredness and worry that creased Taka's brow. "Taka, you do realise how crazy this is, don't you? That Hikari'd go into the book of her own accord… why would she even *know* about it?"

"She wouldn't." Taka admitted, as he scanned the door of the library for the list of opening hours. "But then nor did Miaka, the first time. Keisuke, I know that's where she is. It sounds insane, but I know. And if I can go in there — if I can get her back — then I will."

"Miaka doesn't want you to." Keisuke chided him, placing his hand against the door and pushing it open, grabbing his companion and pulling him inside. "Come on. Don't attract attention to yourself. You know that the room we're heading for is restricted — if we're caught, explaining might be difficult."

"I know." Taka admitted, allowing his companion to lead him through the already busy foyer and up the flight of stairs to the Important Documents Room where the *Shijin-Tenchishou* was stored. "And I don't want to upset Miaka, either. But I'm the only one who can go in there, Keisuke. We all know that. Miaka can't. Mayo can't. Not now their roles as Miko have been played out. There's only me who can go looking for Hikari… and she's my daughter. So I have to go. It's the only possible solution."

"This is so unlike the kid, you know." Keisuke reflected, as they reached their destination. "Ack, and it's locked, too. Any bright ideas, Taka-kun? How are we going to get in there without a key?"

"I'm not letting a lock stop us." Taka slid his hand into his pocket, pulling out a length of wire as he began to fiddle with the fastening, and Keisuke stared at him in disbelief.

"Since when could you do that?"

"Since Miaka kept locking us out of the apartment, and leaving the keys in the car." Taka offered him a grim smile. "I came prepared. I knew we'd not just be able to walk in. Stand guard for me, will you? I

don't want to have to explain why we're doing this, and telling him my daughter's stuck in one of the books might not go down too well."

"You're telling me." Keisuke obediently did as he was bidden. "If she really is in there, though. And if she is, she must be frightened — it's all totally new to her and I can't imagine she'd choose to do this. No matter what kind of a fight you guys had — Hikari's not the kind of girl to run away."

"She's also not the kind of girl to steal." Taka said darkly. "But here we are."

"Steal?" Keisuke looked dumbstruck. "*Hikari-chan*? I don't believe you."

"Well, Miaka caught her red-handed." Taka said with a sigh. "Apparently she's got some hair-brained crush on a guy at school and she thinks that getting his attention is the be all and end all of life. God only knows what the kid is like, if he's had this kind of influence on her before they've even begun to spend time together… but even so, it was a shock to us, too. I sometimes wonder what we've missed — where we've gone wrong. I didn't think Hikari was a rebellious kind of child, but I'm starting to doubt that."

He frowned, as the door gave a soft click.

"There we go. We're in. Still, right now, I've gone past being angry at her… I just want to make sure she's safe."

"I'm sure." Keisuke's brows knitted together. "I can't imagine Hikari being the kind to steal, though. You've raised her better than that."

"I thought we had." Taka admitted. "But truth is, Keisuke, Miaka and I've also concealed things from them, too. I don't know… I guess she feels she has things to resent, too. Things we'll need to put straight, so long as I can get her back."

"Well, if you're so sure this is where she is…" Keisuke shrugged, pushing open the door and stepping into the dark, dusty Documents Room with a shrug of his shoulders. His expert eyes scanned the shelves, immediately finding what he was looking for and pulling it down, glancing at it, then up at his friend.

"It's not as dusty as the others. Looks like someone has played with it recently." He observed.

"Hikari. I told you." Taka said flatly. "Open it, Keisuke. See whether or not we can pinpoint what my daughter's got herself involved in."

“Whatever you say.” Keisuke flipped open the book, stopping dead as he registered the state of the pages. Anxiety and confusion flooded through him as he flicked through a few chapters, then glanced up at his companion.

“They’re black.” He murmured. “All of them. Like… like that time before. When…”

“When Mayo and Miaka and all of us Seishi almost vanished into oblivion.” Taka’s face visibly whitened, and he grabbed the book from his friend, running his finger over the page. “Like then? Like the end of the world?”

“Like that.” Keisuke agreed soberly, and Taka shook his head, biting his lip as he struggled to digest the implications in the other man’s words.

“It can’t be.” He murmured. “It can’t… Hikari’s in here. She’s in here! But… how can she be… if the book is dead?”

Keisuke did not answer, and Taka swallowed hard.

“I can’t even feel anything from it, this time.” He added softly. “Nothing to draw me in. Not even as Tamahome. I’ve felt the oni mark from time to time, lately… but now…”

He faltered, and Keisuke shook his head.

“Hikari can’t be in there. That’s the only solution.” He reflected.

“But I know she is, and so does Miaka.” Taka objected. “Keisuke, what’s happened to my daughter? What kind of a world has she ended up in — and how the hell are we going to get her out?”

As the travellers emerged from Chichiri’s *kasa*on the slope leading down to the Eastern Village, there was an unsettled, unspoken feeling of tension and doubt overhanging all of them and, as Hikari cast the Seishi a sidelong glance, she realised better than anyone the fear that flickered against his senses. As he slipped his hat into its travel position, he did not stop to speak or look at any of them, but instead he headed into the village, his gait tense and anxious as he made a bee-line for his home.

Hikari swallowed hard.

“Should we… go too?” She asked hesitantly, and Tasuki frowned, then he nodded.

“He might need back-up, if there’s somethin’ still hangin’ round this

place." He said quietly. "Keep on your guard, all of you. We don't know what we might encounter, and I ain't lettin' any of you get hurt on my watch."

Hikari's gaze strayed across the village, pausing as her glance rested on the tiled roofing of the Ri family home.

"But…" She murmured. "But… Tasuki…"

She trailed off, feeling suddenly giddy, and as her legs crumpled beneath her, Jin let out an exclamation, reaching to catch her and steady her on her feet.

"Hikari! Are you okay?"

"You look a funny colour." Shishi peered at her, anxiety in her expression. "Kashira, if something's happened — maybe Hiki shouldn't see it. She's a wimp at the best of times — Jin an' I can stay here with her, if you want to go help Chichiri."

Tasuki's eyes narrowed indecisively for a moment, but he seemed to see the sense in his daughter's words, for he nodded, his fingers closing around his tessen as he hurried in the direction his friend had gone.

For a moment, there was silence, and Hikari drew a deep breath into her lungs, struggling to calm her pounding heart.

"Just like in Makan." She whispered, and Jin shot her a funny look.

"Hikari?"

"I think… I'm all right now." Hikari cast him a rueful glance, disentangling herself from his supportive grip as she did so. "It was just, for a moment… like in Makan…"

She faltered, swallowing hard.

"I think Chichiri and I are connected." She admitted unsteadily. "Since Makan, I think we are. That he called on me, and then in Kahou, I could feel what he was afraid of. And it was like… something overwhelmed me. Something suffocating and stifling… something from that house. Chichiri…"

"Something's happened to the kids, hasn't it?" Jin asked softly, and Hikari bit her lip.

"I think… so." She admitted. "We need to follow Tasuki. I'm all right now, I promise. I'm not going to faint. It was just — it hit me without warning."

She cast the red-haired bandit a glance, biting her lip as she met the look in the girl's bronze eyes.

"I guess I shouldn't have focused so hard last night on trying to find Chichiri, Shishi — I think now I'm finding him even when I don't want to."

"You mean you can read his mind or something?" Shishi eyed her warily, as they made their way slowly down the hill towards the old farmhouse. "Because if you're doin' that to people, you ain't sharin' a room with me any more, I'm tellin' you now. An' stop keepin' us in suspense, dammit! What the hell's happened to Meikyo an' Eiju — or do I have to beat it out of you?"

"I *can't* read his mind so I don't know." Hikari snapped, then she sighed. "It's not like that. I can't tell what he's thinking, as such."

"Then how do you know the brats are in trouble? Idiot."

"I just do." Hikari looked frustrated. "It's difficult to explain it. It's just… it's not that I know what he's thinking. I just… I know what makes him most afraid, that's all. When I first came here, when he heard what I said about the world I saw, I know it hurt him. And he admitted to me that of all things, it made him afraid… to lose his family again, like he lost those people in the flood. So when he's scared, I guess… its what I think of. Him telling me that his family are everything to him. And that losing them… losing them…"

She trailed off, tears glittering in her dark eyes as she fought to control her composure.

"That's why I stayed." She whispered. "Because of that. Because his family were so good to me when I didn't have anyone else to rely on. I want to protect them, somehow… and now, if something's happened…"

"Well, we won't know unless we go down there." Jin said gravely. "It's all right, Hikari. It's not your fault, whatever's happened."

"I bet it *is* that bastard assassin." Shishi clenched her fists. "I don't know how, but somehow. I bet it is."

"How would he travel so far in one night?" Jin asked her, and Shishi shrugged.

"He's abnormal." She said bluntly. "I don't know. Maybe he doesn't sleep. Maybe it's some magic assassin power that we don't know about. But I bet it is him… no matter how he pulled it off."

"Do you think he's still here?" Hikari asked tentatively.

Shishi snorted.

“You tell us. *You’re* the one who senses stuff.” She returned, and Hikari shook her head.

“Only Chichiri.” She admitted. “And even he couldn’t tell when the guy was there. It was like he vanished off the radar — like he was completely invisible to Chichiri’s magic. So if *he* couldn’t do it, there’s no way *I* could.”

“He was *invisible*?” Jin looked startled. “How the hell is that possible?”

“It ain’t, unless he’s some kind of sorcerer too.” Shishi said pragmatically. “He’s an assassin — he used weapons, not spells. It must’ve been an illusion — he was dressed all in black, so I guess he hid in the shadows.”

“That doesn’t explain why Chichiri couldn’t sense him any more, when he was right there.” Hikari shivered. “Does it?”

At that moment they reached the house, and Hikari hesitated, unwilling to go any further as she remembered the vision of the sleeping skeletal children that had haunted her since her arrival in this world. Jin, seeing the look on her face strode forward, placing his hand on the door, and then, with a momentary pause, he pushed it back.

Something red had dripped along the hallway and into the main chamber and, as the three entered, Hikari drew breath sharply, registering the hunched form of Chichiri cradling something protectively in his arms. From the glimpse of dark fabric and red hair, Hikari realised with a jolt that the fallen form was Aidou, and for an instant, fear coursed her heart.

“Aidou-obasama!” Shishi hurried forwards, dropping down at Chichiri’s side, and Hikari took a tentative step or two towards them, unsure as to what she should do. As she did so, however, she registered the slight stirring of the woman’s still body and relief flooded her young heart.

So she was still alive.

“Shishi-chan.” Chichiri’s voice was low and controlled, and he sounded like a stranger to the frightened school-girl’s ears. “Will you run to the stream and get fresh water? You know the mountain better than anyone — can you do that for me?”

“For sure.” Shishi was up on her feet in an instant, haring out of the

door and almost knocking Jin flying in her haste to carry out the errand. As he helped his dazed wife into a more upright position, Chichiri seemed to notice Hikari for the first time, and an unspoken message seemed to pass between them as Hikari registered the anguish in his ruby gaze.

"Is there something *I* can do, Chichiri?" She asked softly. "Is… is Aidou-san… all right?"

"Just stunned, I think." Chichiri brushed stray wisps of hair from his wife's face and Hikari bit her lip, registering the bruising and caked blood that stained her brow. "Thank you, Hikari, but I don't think there is… anything."

"And… and the children?" Hikari's voice was little more than a whisper. As soon as she'd asked the question, she wished that she could take it back, for Chichiri's expression became even more troubled.

"Tasuki has Eiju." He murmured. "Aidou managed to hide him in a cupboard, and he escaped — but he's confused and Tasuki's trying to get sense from him — trying to find out what happened. Mei-chan… is… not here."

"Mei-chan!" Hikari's eyes opened wide with dismay, and Chichiri nodded, a slow, jerky movement as if his mind was miles away from their conversation.

"H… Hou Jun?" At this juncture, Aidou's eyes fluttered open, and Chichiri gazed down at her, touching her cheek gently as he slowly shook his head.

"Don't try to get up. Something hit you pretty hard." He said gently. "It's all right. I'm home now. It'll all be okay."

"Where are… Eiju and… Meikyo?" Aidou asked faintly, and Chichiri bit his lip.

"Eiju is fine." He said at length. "And Mei-chan… I'll see to Mei-chan. I told you. Don't worry. It will be all right."

"What happened, Aidou-san?" Hikari dropped down onto her knees at the woman's side. "Someone attacked you — did they say why?"

"I didn't even see them." Aidou confessed. "I heard the children screaming… but I didn't see anyone. I grabbed Eiju and got him to safety — but I couldn't… I couldn't see Meikyo. I… she was shrieking for me, Hou Jun. She was crying and screaming but I… I couldn't find her. I tried, but then something hit me… and… and I don't remember

anything else."

"Someone took her." At that moment Tasuki re-entered the room, a grim look on his face as he ushered a white-faced, frightened Eiju before him. "Eiju said he didn't see anyone, but it was like something grabbed her and hauled her away before he could even react. He wanted to protect her, but he didn't know how to, and when Aidou told him to hide, he did as he was bidden. He didn't see anyone attack her — but it seems pretty clear what happened, from everything he's said."

"You did the right thing, Eiju-kun." Chichiri said softly, holding out his hand to his son as the young boy came slowly and falteringly to his father's side. "Don't look so guilty — it's not your fault. I should have been here to protect you all — it's *my* fault, not yours. You were right to hide… and I'm glad you're safe."

"But what about Mei-chan, Papa?" Eiju asked, his attempts at being grown up thwarted in an instant by the tears that glimmered in his ruby eyes. "What about Mei-chan?"

"There's a message scrawled on the wall of the outhouse." Tasuki said quietly. "It's pretty to the point, Chichiri. Whoever's got the kid wants to make a trade — no prizes for guessing what it is they want."

Chichiri's expression darkened and he slipped his hand into the folds of his clothing, pulling out the small black casket and glancing at it.

"The Shinzahou." He murmured.

"Then it *was* that Miramu guy." Jin realised. "Shishi was right — somehow, he *did* get here before us."

"M… Miramu?" Aidou stared at her husband, who slowly shook his head.

"Someone who's crossed a line too many." He said darkly. "Don't worry, Aidou. I'll go and get Meikyo back. If he's got her as tribute — as a hostage to tempt a trade, he won't have hurt her. So I'll go find her. Even if I can't track *him* down, I can most definitely track *her*."

He glanced at the black box, then held it out to Tasuki, who took it, a question in his eyes.

"You ain't takin' this?"

"I'm not making any kind of trade with a man like that." Chichiri said flatly. "I'm going to get my daughter back, and that's all. Tasuki, will you stay here and look after Aidou and Eiju while I do? Hikari

and the others should stay here too, when Shishi returns from the stream. I don't think Aidou's hurt badly — just stunned — and it doesn't look like Eiju's injured at all. But I don't want to open them up to another potential attack."

"You don't even have to ask." Tasuki said frankly. "I'm not going anywhere… and if he or anyone tries any kind of trouble, I'll make them wish they'd chosen another family to harass."

"I appreciate it." Chichiri's good eye flickered with faint gratitude for a moment. Then, he got to his feet, gripping his *shakujou* tightly as he pulled his *kasa* from his back.

"I'll bring her back." He said softly. "Don't worry about that."

Then, with a flash of magic, he was gone.

Chapter 16

Chapter Fifteen

Meikyo was gone.

Hikari gazed up at the wispy clouds that dotted Kounan's sky, a mixture of anger and frustration swirling in her young heart. Inside the house, Shishi had returned with water and she and Tasuki had bent their efforts to cleaning up and taking care of the dazed Aidou and the frightened Eiju. But Hikari's mind had been preoccupied only by the unknown fate of the small girl who had extended such a warm greeting to her when she had first arrived in the Eastern Village.

"Pleased to meet you, Hikari-neesan!"

Meikyo's words echoed in her brain once more, and she clenched her fists, tears glittering in her eyes as she inwardly called Miramu every bad name she could think of.

"What kind of monster rips a little girl away from her family like that, just over an earring?" She muttered. "Who cares if it's the Shinzahou? Mei-chan's only eight years old — she didn't do anything and she's not even involved! And Chichiri… poor Chichiri. What he's feeling…"

She sighed, sinking down against the wall of the property as the tears began to trickle slowly down her cheeks.

"I know what he's feeling." She admitted to herself. "And I don't like it."

"Hikari-chan?" Jin's voice startled her and she glanced up, offering him a faint, unconvincing smile. At the sight of her tears, Jin frowned, dropping down beside her with a sigh. He fumbled in his pocket for a crumpled scrap of fabric that might, in some universes pass as a hankerchief, handing it to her, and she took it hesitantly, folding it between her fingers.

"I'm sorry." She murmured. "I knew if I stayed in there with them, I'd just cry and upset Aidou-san more. I don't like this, Jin. Meikyo's such a little kid… what if he hurts her?"

"Kashira thinks he won't." Jin reflected evenly, eying her keenly. "Because he wants to make a trade. I think Meikyo's all right, Hikari. And you must, too. Chichiri-san's strong, anyway. He'll save her. You

know that."

"How?" Hikari whispered. "Tasuki has the Shinzahou. How can he make a trade without the treasure?"

"I don't know, but he'll think of something." Jin admitted. "Besides, that earring thing is dangerous in the wrong hands, right? That's why we went to get it in the first place, isn't it? It sort of defeats the object, if we hand it over to the enemy like that."

"Meikyo's life matters more." Hikari murmured, and Jin rested a hand on her arm.

"Of course it does. All life does." He said, uncharacteristically serious, and Hikari stared at the gravity in his dark eyes. "But listen. You said yourself you'd seen the world all wrecked up, didn't you…?"

"Yes…"

"So in the end, us having the Shinzahou means that won't happen… doesn't it?"

"I don't know." Hikari admitted. "But I didn't mean…"

She frowned, rubbing her temples.

"When I came here, I saw Aidou-san and the children dead, as if they'd been sleeping for years, untouched and forgotten." She whispered. "But Meikyo is in danger *now*, Jin. And if she dies now, then I… by coming here, I *have* changed things, haven't I? I've brought her death forward. I stayed here to help Chichiri and his family, but what if I've made them suffer more? Meikyo's so innocent — I couldn't bear it."

"I told you. I don't think this Miramu guy is stupid — providing it is him we're dealing with and not some other random nut." Jin said gently. "He knows that he won't get any cooperation from us if Meikyo dies."

"But Chichiri doesn't have the Shinzahou." Hikari said helplessly. "And he can't get Meikyo back without it."

"I'm sure he can, you know."

Hikari was silent for a moment, staring out across the field of herb crops as she watched the leaves of the plants swaying slightly in the gentle breeze.

"So peaceful." She murmured, more than half to herself. "This is the world that Meikyo and Eiju know, isn't it? Not travelling and fighting and facing assassins or Seishi with murder on their mind. This village,

this farm… it's all been shattered by Miramu's invasion."

"I know. It makes me mad, too." Jin agreed. "Women an' children should never be brought into men's battles… it's a low blow."

"Unless they choose to be there." Hikari said suddenly, and Jin stared at her.

"Well, sure. I mean, you're different, ain't you? An' Shishi, too." He reflected, offering her a rueful smile. "You're both connected to Suzaku in one way or another. But I meant people like Aidou-san an' the kids here. People who jus' mind their own business, livin' in the villages."

"Connected to Suzaku." Hikari murmured, toying idly with the end of her long braid of hair as she considered his words. Inside of her, she felt something flicker and dance, and she bit her lip, knowing that it was the flare of Suzaku's dormant magic.

"Chichiri can't do this on his own." She decided, getting to her feet. "He was never meant to fight battles by himself, after all. He's one of the Seishi — he's not a lone fighter."

"Hikari-chan?" Jin gazed up at her in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"Suzaku." Hikari said softly. "I think. What you just said, about being connected."

"You've lost me."

"I know. I probably lost myself, too." Hikari admitted. "But think about it. If that Miramu guy really can pierce Chichiri's barrier, and disperse his magic, doesn't that mean he can hurt Chichiri as well as Meikyo? What's to stop him killing the both of them, especially if he realises they don't have what he wants? And besides, Chichiri's hampered — he knows that Meikyo could be in real danger if he acts… no matter how much of a Suzaku warrior he is, Jin, he's… he's still a father."

She bit her lip, dashing her tears from her lashes as she made up her mind.

"And he told me that all parents love their children more than anything." She added softly. "No matter what."

"What are you thinking?" Jin asked her warily, and Hikari glanced back towards the house, catching sight of the black casket that sat on the table forgotten as Tasuki tended to his wounded elder sister.

“I think someone should go after him.” She said softly. “And make the trade.”

“Hikari…” Jin’s eyes opened wide and he shook his head. “Don’t be stupid. We need that thing — don’t we? If we don’t have it, Kounan is still in danger. And shit, Hikari, you won’t be able to go home — will you?”

Hikari faltered for a moment, as the truth of his words washed over her. Then her eyes narrowed and she shook her head.

“I can’t help it.” She admitted. “When Suzaku’s people are in trouble, I feel… totally not like myself. And right now it doesn’t matter to me that I can’t go home. I’m Suzaku no Shinzahou and I have to be here to… to help protect Kounan, too. Isn’t that right?”

“Hikari-chan…” Jin eyed her keenly, then he sighed, nodding his head.

“You mean to go yourself, don’t you?” He asked softly. Hikari spread her hands.

“I think so.” She admitted. “I don’t see how else to do it. Tasuki and Shishi are busy with Aidou-san and Eiju — they probably wouldn’t notice if I slipped out for a little bit. And… and I can find Chichiri. At the moment, I can find him really easily, Jin. I… I can’t explain what it feels like, but it’s just like what happened in Makan. I know he’s in trouble and I can’t sit back and not do anything about it. I don’t even know if it’s me making the decisions, or if it’s Suzaku inside of me. But either way, I have to do something. I don’t have a choice — I have to.”

“It’s dangerous, you know.”

“Yes, I know.” Hikari nodded her head. “But even so…”

“And what about your prediction? What about letting the enemy have their Shinzahou?”

“So long as Kounan has Suzaku’s, nothing can happen, right?” Hikari said frankly.

“You’d really not go home?”

“I’ve already decided, Jin.” Hikari agreed softly. “And I’ll probably hate it… or regret it… when this is all over. But right now, I can’t think of anything but Chichiri and Meikyo and doing Suzaku’s bidding.”

Jin’s eyes narrowed for a moment. Then he sighed.

“Then I’m coming with you.” He said softly.

“Jin?” Hikari eyed him in surprise, and Jin spread his hands.

“It might be dangerous, and you might need a diversion.” He said frankly. “Two heads are better’n one, and Kashira’d brain me if I let you go off on your own. As it is, you’re goin’ to have to get past him an’ Shishi without them realisin’.”

“Right now, Tasuki’s more preoccupied with Aidou-san.” Hikari said sadly. “They’re brother and sister, and she’s been hurt. And Shishi, too. They’re family. I doubt a stupid earring means much to them right now. And we’re in the way, you and me. If you’re really so sure about coming, I won’t stop you. But you won’t change my mind. I’ll do what it takes to get Meikyo back safely, and Chichiri too… even if that means giving up Seiryuu’s Shinzahou to a jerk like this Miramu!”

He was getting closer.

As Chichiri crept carefully along the mountain path, he paused to raise a hand to the wind, his good eye narrowing as he realised he was on the right track. So, the assassin had not gone far, after all. A grim smile touched his lips as he realised that the tactic had been deliberate.

“He hoped to lure me here, so that I’d give him what he wanted and he can be on his way.” He muttered. “Dammit, I don’t understand how he got to the Eastern Village before we did, or how he manages to conceal himself from my senses. But this time he’s not even trying to hide. I can sense both him and Meikyo up ahead — he must know that I’m here. That I’m tracing his trail and coming to confront him. Which means he can probably sense me as much as I can him — however he’s doing it.”

His gaze hardened.

“I won’t forgive him if he’s hurt my daughter.” He added. “Don’t worry, Mei-chan. Papa is on his way.”

As he passed a copse of trees, a small,tile-roofed building loomed out of the greenery and he hesitated, realising with a jolt that this small, hidden hut was the place Miramu had chosen to hide.

“Almost concealed by trees.” Chichiri murmured aloud. “In the depths of the mountains. I wonder if this is the hut Tasuki talks about — the secret hideout he and Kouji used to use as a refuge from time to time. He really hasn’t gone far at all — so luring me out *is* his main

objective, after all."

"An astute observation, Chichiri-san."

The voice echoed out of the landscape and Chichiri started, swinging around as he realised the assassin's life force had once more disappeared from his sensors. There was an amused chuckle, then a whoosh of air, and Chichiri was aware of something dropping down from the trees in front of him. His eyes widened with disbelief, even as he projected a barrier around his body, for little by little, the image of his enemy became clear before him.

"How did you…" He whispered, and Miramu smirked, shaking his head as he folded his arms across his chest.

"Assassins have tricks of the trade." He said softly. "You're predictible, you know. I had a feeling I knew what would bring you to me… and here you are."

"Where's Meikyo?" Chichiri gathered his composure, shooting his companion an uncharacteristically venomous glance. "If you've hurt her, Miramu, I swear…"

"You'll what?" Miramu eyed him keenly. "Kill me?"

"If I have to."

"Ah, I see." Miramu tut-tutted. "And I thought you were a more logical, rational man than that, Chichiri. Or should I say *Ri Hou Jun*?"

Chichiri flinched at the use of his real name, a dark look glittering in his ruby eyes.

"That depends." He said quietly. "On whether or not someone tries to harm people I care about."

Miramu's expression became one of amusement, and slowly he shook his head.

"You can relax." He said softly. "The child is alive. She's inside… you can come see her for yourself, if you want to."

"I don't have to. I can feel that she's alive." Chichiri snapped. "But just because you haven't killed her doesn't mean you haven't hurt her — frightened her. This isn't her battle, it's mine and yours. You have issues with me then you take them up with me, face to face. As Tasuki would say, involving others is a coward's game."

"Or an assassin's tactic." Miramu laughed. "You really look ready to strike me down, Chichiri — I didn't expect such vitriolic hate from a man who once walked the landscape in the garb of a monk!"

“That was a long time ago.” Chichiri said softly. “And I’m not afraid to fight you, if that’s what it takes to get my daughter released.”

“I’d prefer it if you’d just hand over Seiryuu’s treasure.” Miramu admitted. “I’m not crazy about fighting someone who really doesn’t pose me a lot of a challenge. Besides, you might as well know now that, no matter what you do, you can’t kill me. It’s written in the stars — you can try, but it’s a lost battle before you begin.”

Chichiri, who had been gathering his magic inside of him paused at this, eying his companion in confusion.

“What do you mean?”

“What I said. Today isn’t my day to die.” Miramu said evenly. “I’ll be here tomorrow, and the next day, and the next after that, you have my word on it. However, I don’t know about you or your pup — I expect both or either of you could die here and now, if you were to choose not to cooperate with me.”

Chichiri frowned, gauging his opponant for signs of bluff, but there were none. Miramu met his gaze evenly, his odd indigo eyes glittering with something beyond normal fighting instinct, and even though his quiver was nowhere in evidence, Chichiri suddenly had the sensation that if he chose, this mysterious man had plenty of tricks up his sleeve.

“Well?” He asked quietly, as the Seishi hesitated. “Do you still want to fight me? Or can we negotiate like adults? I really have no interest in your little girl — in any regard. You have my word that I will release her, as soon as you hand over Seiryuu’s earring.”

“I don’t have it.” Chichiri said truthfully. “So you’ve gone to all this trouble for nothing. It’s not in my possession, you know.”

Miramu’s eyes narrowed.

“I could kill you, still.” He warned, and Chichiri spread his hands.

“You could try.” He admitted evenly. “But even if you did, and you searched my body, you’d find I was telling you the truth. The Shinzahou isn’t in my possession.”

Miramu’s lips thinned.

“You’ve left it somewhere.” He murmured. “Let me guess — that fire-throwing oaf Tasuki has it? You really think you can come here and barter with me for your daughter’s life without the treasure? You are more stupid than I thought. Or are you really willing to risk the child’s life by taking the gamble? If so, you really are reckless.”

“She’s my daughter. I don’t expect you to understand, but Shinzahou or not, there’s no way I wouldn’t have come.” Chichiri said darkly. “Fathers protect their children, Miramu. No matter what.”

At this a strange flicker crossed the assassin’s dark eyes, and Chichiri had the definite impression that he’d said something to wound his opponant somehow. Miramu let out a bitter laugh, shaking his head.

“Not *all* fathers.” He said softly. “*Some* lie pooling in their own blood as penance for what they’ve done. By coming here without the treasure, Chichiri, you’ve sealed your daughter’s fate, and your own. She will die, and then I’ll kill you too, just for being so arrogant to assume that the ties of parent and child are strong enough to save the day.”

He flung back the door of the small hut, and for the first time Chichiri was aware of his young daughter, tears streaming down her face as she crouched in a corner, her wrists and ankles bound. As the assassin crossed the floor towards her, a flash of rage flooded Chichiri’s heart and he lunged forward, grabbing the man by the arm and pulling him roughly back.

“You’re *not* going to hurt her!” He exclaimed, and Miramu wheeled on him, a strange, half-deranged look in his dark eyes.

“What kind of a man do you think I am?” He hissed back. “I’m not someone you can reason with, or whose better nature you can appeal to. I have no better nature, Chichiri. I’m a killer. I spill blood for money.”

He narrowed his gaze, wrenching himself free from the Seishi’s grasp as he flung back his arm, sending the unprepared Chichiri flying back across the room.

“You should have brought the earring.” He murmured. “I would have made a trade, then.”

“*Papa! Papa*!” Meikyo’s frightened screams penetrated Chichiri’s consciousness and he pulled himself to his feet, his aura glittering with red energy as he drew on his strength to cast a spell, but as he did so, Miramu grabbed the child roughly, pulling her to her feet and holding her in front of him as a shield.

“Hit me and hit her too.” He said evenly. “Your spells are legendary, and I’ve no intention of being hit by one of them, thank you.”

“Let her go.” Chichiri said flatly, and Miramu shook his head. He

flicked his fingers and Chichiri's heart clenched as he registered the glitter of a blade that now pressed gently against Meikyo's throat.

"Papa! Papa, help me! *Help me*!" Meikyo was almost hysterical now, and Chichiri bit his lip, his aura fading as he realised there was no way to hit his opponant without bringing his daughter into the blast.

"And I can't project a barrier around her whilst he's holding her like that." He murmured.

"Well?" Miramu taunted. "Aren't you going to take your shot? I'm going to kill her anyway, right here in front of you. The only difference is whether you give her a quick death or I give her a slow one. It takes quite some time to bleed to death, you know… we could wait and see just how long. I had wanted to do this without spilling blood, but if this is how you want it, I'll oblige. If I have to kill your whole family to get what I want — so be it."

There was a glitter of metal, and Meikyo screamed, as spatters of red cascaded down onto the floor of the hut.

"*Mei-chan*!" Chichiri's heart stopped in his chest as he lunged forwards, realising as he did so that Miramu had sliced his dagger cleanly across the young girl's arm, and that blood was flowing freely from the wound.

"Well?" Miramu raised a challenging gaze. "Tick-tock. You can't kill me, I told you that. You can only kill her. Then I'll kill you. And if you'd brought the treasure, none of this would have happened. Tragic, isn't it, when parents make the wrong decisions for their kids?"

His eyes narrowed, and Chichiri saw a glitter of ice coldness in the indigo gaze.

"But then, I've always felt fathers were overrated." He said softly. "And I'm sure, right now, Meikyo feels the same way."

Chichiri glanced at them, gauging whether or not he could act fast enough to take the assassin off balance and release his daughter, but as he did so, something else assailed his senses and he faltered, his good eye widening with disbelief.

"Hikari-chan?" He whispered. "But… what the…"

"Hikari?" Miramu stared at him, confused. "Have you lost your mind now, Sorcerer? Has seeing your daughter bleeding driven you so far out of your wits?"

"Let her go, you jerk!"

Before Chichiri could respond, a fresh voice interrupted the conversation, and Chichiri shifted his gaze to the doorway, biting his lip as he registered the schoolgirl, determination in her gaze. Behind her stood the young bandit Jin, his sword drawn as if preparing for a battle, and at the sight of them, Miramu laughed.

"Well. *More* children coming to die for you, Chichiri? You are honoured, aren't you?" He taunted, and at this, Hikari's eyes narrowed.

"Let Meikyo go." She said again, taking a determined step into the room and Chichiri registered with a jolt that the same unearthly look as he had seen in Makan glimmered in her gaze.

"Suzaku…" He breathed. "But… Hikari-chan, no! It's dangerous — get out of here! I told you…"

"Hikari-neesan!" Meikyo reached a bloody hand out towards the teenager, and this seemed to harden Hikari's resolve. She approached Miramu determinedly, pausing a few feet away from him, and slipping her hand into her pocket. Slowly she drew out the small black casket, and Chichiri's heart skipped a beat.

"Hikari, what are you…"

"I have what you want, Miramu." Hikari ignored Chichiri's protests, holding the small box out. "The Seiryuu Shinzahou. Yui-sama's earring is inside this box. And I'll give it to you, if you let Meikyo go."

"Well." Miramu's eyes narrowed, his gaze flitting between Hikari and Chichiri as he digested this. "So you left it in the care of a child, Chichiri? You really are careless… or is this an extension of your paternal beliefs?"

"Hikari, you can't let him have it! You know you can't!" Chichiri objected, but Hikari shook her head.

"It's all right." She said softly. "Chichiri, trust me. It's all right."

She glanced back at Miramu.

"Meikyo for the treasure, isn't that what you wanted?" She repeated. "So let her go. Take it and go. You're sick and I hate the sight of you… if you want this thing so bad, take it and leave us alone."

Miramu frowned, reaching out to pluck the box from her grip. He opened it, and a blueish glow shone from the casket for the briefest of instants as he gazed down on Yui's sacred earring. A faint smile touched his lips, and he nodded, releasing his grip on Meikyo as the

child tumbled to the floor.

“So one of you has sense.” He reflected. “Very well. A deal is a deal.”

He eyed Hikari pensively, then,

“Hikari, is it?” He murmured. “Well, Hikari. I’m glad that one of Chichiri’s hangers-on has the sense to realise I don’t play games. Thanks to you, noone’s dying — providing, of course, that you can stop the child’s bleeding before she loses too much.”

He winked at her, then, as if by magic, he disappeared.

“What the…” Jin stared blankly at the space where the assassin had been, as Chichiri hurried forwards to gather his injured daughter up in his arms, glancing anxiously at her wound as she buried her head in his shoulder, sobbing violently.

“Papa… Papa…” She wept, and Chichiri held her tightly, stroking her tousled red hair.

“It’s all right, Mei-chan.” He murmured. “I’m here. You’re safe now. I promise… you’re safe.”

“Is she… is her arm…” Hikari stepped hesitantly forward, and Chichiri nodded.

“It’s a flesh wound.” He agreed, pulling a length of fabric from his pocket and winding it tightly around the offending injury. “Hikari, you shouldn’t have done that. I know you wanted to help Meikyo, but…”

“It was the only thing to do.” Hikari said softly, and for a moment, her aura seemed to glitter once more with red, divine light. Chichiri’s eyes widened.

“Suzaku…?”

“He’s inside of me again.” Hikari admitted. “He made me come. I can’t explain it… but… it was like… I couldn’t bear to do anything else. And… and it’s all right, Chichiri. Really. They might have Seiryuu’s Shinzahou, but they… they can’t have Suzaku’s. And I… I’m not going to let them have me, no matter what.”

“Hikari-chan…” Chichiri trailed off, staring at her as he absorbed the resolution in her dark eyes. “But… without Seiryuu’s treasure…”

“I can’t go home. I know.” Hikari sighed, sinking down beside them as she touched Meikyo gently on the arm. “But I made you a promise, didn’t I? That I wouldn’t go home until your family was safe. And

me… being here… I wasn't going to let Mei-chan get hurt. I promised… and if that means I have to stay a little longer, then I… I'll stay. After all, I really don't know how to be Suzaku no Shinzahou yet. But… I was thinking about that. If… if I learnt how — if I really did wake this magic inside of me, couldn't I… couldn't I summon Suzaku?"

"Summon Suzaku?" Chichiri stared at her, and Hikari nodded.

"Shishi said something about wishes." She added. "Is that true? That you can make wishes and the Beast God grants them?"

"Yes." Chichiri agreed. "But…"

"Then I can wish for Kutou to be stopped." Hikari said evenly. "Can't I?"

"Hikari…" Chichiri faltered, then he smiled, reaching up to touch her cheek.

"Right now you look like your mother." He reflected absently. "You have that same resolve in your eyes as she had when she made up her mind to do something. I'll never forget how she looked, when she summoned Suzaku to your world to bring Nakago down and save us all. And right now, you could be her over again."

"Then I need to learn how to be Suzaku's Shinzahou." Hikari agreed.

"Right now, we need to get Meikyo home." Chichiri got to his feet, cradling his young child in his arms, and Meikyo tightened her grasp on her father, her tears quieted some by his comforting presence. "But we *will* talk about this, Hikari. I think it's time we did as you say — we discussed your power and whether or not there's a way of bringing it out of you."

His eyes narrowed.

"Did you trace me here?" He asked softly. Hikari nodded.

"I can do that, now. It's easy." She agreed. "Even when I don't want to, I think."

"Then that's a start." Chichiri reflected. "But we'll have to think about this carefully. And talk to Taiitsukun, as well. See what she advises. After all, if we're right, and Miramu is working for Kutou, they have one Shinzahou now and so do we. But this is a matter of all four treasures… we might find we're travelling again, and we don't know how much time we might have."

“It’s no use, if Miramu just pops up like that again and again.” Jin said darkly. Chichiri shrugged.

“Such is the nature of battle.” He said sadly. “You’re right, Jin. We need to find a way to take care of him, too. But he doesn’t seem to have a clear weakness. He also told me that I couldn’t kill him — that it was written in the stars. I don’t know what he meant, but one thing I am sure of. There’s something unusual about this particular assassin. He’s not your average killer for hire. He has… something else about him.”

“He vanished right in front of us.” Jin agreed. “That’s weird right there.”

“Maybe he *is* a sorcerer of some kind.” Hikari suggested. “He moves fast, and he’s strange… perhaps it’s a spell. He has crazy eyes, too… perhaps he’s not even a man at all. Maybe he’s some kind of demon — you have demons in this world, right?”

“Yes.” Chichiri agreed. “But…”

He shook his head.

“Smell the air.” He said softly, and Hikari stared at him.

“Huh?”

“Can’t you smell it? The aura of herbs that linger around this place — and around him?”

“Herbs?” Jin frowned. “Is it all to do with potions, then? Is he that kind of spell-caster?”

“Hard to be sure, you know.” Chichiri admitted. “But one scent does stand out over the others.”

He grimaced.

“Ma Huang.”

“Ma Huang?” Hikari looked blank. “What the hell is Ma Huang when it’s at home?”

“It’s a stimulant. People use it in medicines.” Chichiri said evenly. “But judging by the way his eyes gleam, and the speed and aggression with which he changes temperament, I’d say our assassin uses it rather more than that. Whether or not he has any kind of underlying spiritual power, or whether he uses other herbs as illusory spells, I wouldn’t like to bet. However, it’s not all God-given… on that count I’m fairly sure.”

“You mean, he’s a drug addict?” Hikari’s expression became derisive. “That’s what you mean? That’s how he got to the Eastern Village before we did? He didn’t sleep, but just travelled through the night, stoked up on some herbal remedy?”

“Possibly.” Chichiri agreed. “Either way, it makes him a dangerous opponent. Hikari-chan, you were lucky he was reasonable in his dealing with you. Ma Huang might speed up reactions and it’s true that it has many medicinal benefits. But abused, it can make the user irrational, violent and unpredictable. If I’m right, we should treat him with extreme care in the future… if he is using it to hone his skills, there’s no telling what else it might make him do.”

“If he tries to hurt Meikyo again, I might get irrational, violent and unpredictable too.” Hikari said darkly, and once more Chichiri was aware of the faint glittering in her aura. He smiled ruefully, shaking his head.

“You have the spirit to protect Kounan’s people, when you talk like that.” He reflected, and Hikari reddened.

“It’s like having someone else living inside of me.” She confessed. “I don’t know how it switches on or off, but when someone’s in danger — when Suzaku’s people are — it’s like I have to do something, or explode. Even if that something is dangerous. But it takes it out of me — I guess I’m just not used to it yet.”

She sighed, and Chichiri was aware of the tiredness that flickered in her hazel eyes.

“We should go back to the village and let Chichiri-san treat Meikyo’s arm.” Jin said softly, holding an arm out to her and she took it, glancing at him gratefully. Chichiri nodded.

“Yes.” He agreed. “And we won’t worry about Miramu for the time being. As you say, Hikari-chan, if you can learn to be Suzaku’s Shinzahou, then nothing he can do will be able to stop us saving Kounan and preventing this disaster. So for now, that’s how we’ll think.”

He paused, glancing at his daughter, then at his young companions.

“I hope Tamahome and Miaka can forgive me for keeping you here so long.” He murmured. “They must be worried… I wish there was some way to tell them you were safe.”

“*Is* there a way?” Hikari looked doubtful, and Chichiri shook his head.

“I don’t know.” He admitted. “To communicate with the other world, we need a medium. Something that exists in your world and in this one. Miaka always used her clothing — the strange uniform she wore when she travelled into Kounan. But your clothes were destroyed when you came here, so that’s no good.”

Hikari’s eyes widened, as she clasped her fingers around her left wrist, staring at the sorcerer with a sudden look of inspiration on her face.

“My *watch*!” She exclaimed. “Chichiri — could we use… could my watch… do you think it would work, to use this?”

“What the hell is that?” Jin sent her a non-plussed glance, as she unfastened the buckle, holding it out to the Seishi to look at. Hikari offered him a smile.

“In my world, we all have them, to keep track of the time.” She explained. “Only mine is broken — it doesn’t work any more. I just kept it because… well, it was the only thing from the other world I had left.”

“So it’s like some kind of water clock?” Jin’s brow furrowed. “I don’t see how it works. There are no numbers — how can it know?”

“Well, it’s battery is flat.” Hikari sighed. “Normally it has numbers — there. But I guess… it looks weird to you because it’s digital. I’m lazy — it’s so much easier to know what time it is, this way.”

“Digital?” Jin stared, and Hikari nodded.

“Is that some kind of magic in your world?”

“I suppose it sort of is.” Hikari considered, biting her lip. “Kind of. I hadn’t thought about my world as having magic, but I suppose… it runs on battery power and that’s electricity… and electricity is kind of like magic. It’d be like… well, controlling lightning and stuff, I guess. You’d think of that as magic, wouldn’t you?”

“No kidding.” Jin looked rueful. “And it tells the time, in your world?”

“Yes.” Hikari nodded. “Chichiri — do you think it would be possible?”

Chichiri ran his fingers over the clock face, eying it thoughtfully for a moment. Then, slowly, he nodded.

“I can try, you know. Once we’re back in the Eastern Village.” He agreed. “It might or might not be possible — remember, you’re on a

different stream of time now to the one you were on before. But I'll give it my best, I promise. In the circumstances, it's the least I can do."

Hikari smiled, nodding her head.

"Then lets get Meikyo back to her mother." She suggested. "And then… then we'll work out a way of telling Mum and Dad where I am!"

Chapter 17

Chapter Sixteen

The book's pages had been black.

Taka paced across the front room of the Sukunami family apartment, a troubled look in his eyes as he contemplated what it meant. He and Keisuke had arrived back at the apartment building only moments earlier, and neither one of them had been quite sure how to explain to Miaka what they had found. It had therefore been a relief to both to discover a scrawled note saying she had gone to Yui's workplace to seek her advice. Keisuke had volunteered to make tea, aware of his brother-in-law's thinly veiled distress, and Taka had been left alone with his own thoughts — an unenviable position, he realised with a bitter smile.

He sighed, crossing the small room and pushing back the door, heading along the corridor towards the small bedroom that had been Hikari's own since she had been a tiny baby. For a moment he hesitated, then turned the handle, stepping into the teenage girl's world as he gazed pensively around the unexceptional, slightly messy chamber. Hikari's school uniform still lay tossed over the back of the chair where she had left it the night before, and it seemed hard to believe surrounded by this normality that anything could possibly have happened to his daughter.

"But it did. We fought. You shouted and so did I." He whispered, sitting down on the bed and fingering the paws of the worn stuffed rabbit that had been Hikari's companion when she had been much younger. Faintly he remembered the day he had won it for her, at a carnival in the centre of the city, and for years it had trailed Hikari everywhere, until she had reached the point where she was 'too old' for such childish fancies. Still, she had never put the rabbit into storage, and gazing at it now, Taka felt his helplessness wash over him once again.

"Why would you take money from Keisuke… why would you say those things… and where are you, Hikari-chan?" He murmured. "It doesn't matter any more… whatever you've done, however angry I am. Just… we want you to come home, your mother and I. Do you know that we love you as much as we do? And if you have gone into the book — what does that mean? If you are there… I can't follow

you. I can't help you — are you even all right?"

"*Tamahome-kun*!"

The voice startled him, causing him to physically jump and drop the rabbit down onto the bedclothes as he gazed around him for the source of the noise. The room seemed silent and empty, however, and he put his hand to his pounding heart, certain that now his worry had led him to have delusions.

"Too little sleep." He muttered. "Dammit, I'm losing my mind. Hikari-chan, where are you? Where the hell are you!"

"*Tamahome-kun, can you hear me*?"

The voice came again, stronger this time, and with a jolt Taka realised it had not been his imagination. His eyes widened, as he scoured the room anew, looking for the speaker — but there was noone there.

"Where are you!" He exclaimed. "Who are you — what do you want!"

"*That's a nice greeting for an old friend, Taka-kun*." The voice was reproachful, and now Taka's eyes widened with disbelief as at last he recognised the distinctive, teasing tones.

"Chi… Chichiri? But… how? Where? I don't…"

"*You can't see me… it's a miracle you can hear me.*" Chichiri's voice faded in and out slightly, and Taka frowned, registering a faint reddish glimmer around the edges of Hikari's bedside alarm clock. His heart in his throat, he scooped it up, gripping it tightly in his hands.

"What the hell is going on!" He demanded. "Chichiri — is it really you? How is that… how is it even possible? Where are you?"

"*Kounan, where else*?" Chichiri sounded amused. "*Tamahome-kun, this isn't the time for idle chatter. I can't hold this spell long — it's difficult, you know? So don't ask questions… just listen to me, all right?"*

"I'm listening." Taka bit his lip, his gaze flitting to the door as he wondered whether or not Keisuke could hear his strange conversation with the battery powered alarm clock. "Go on. Whatever it is — if it involves me coming back into the book, Chichiri, I can't. There's no way. It's not possible… I can't get back."

"*I said listen, didn't I?"* Chichiri tut-tutted, and his voice became faint once more. *"This is taking all my concentration as it is, you know — its not easy penetrating space and time to make contact with you!"*

"Space and… time?"

"*You're worried about Hikari, aren't you?"*

"How did you know that?"

"*Because she's worried about you, too. And that you're angry with her — about something she did before she left home."*

"Hikari… is with you?" Hope flared in Taka's heart, followed by despair. "But… how? Why? I don't… I don't understand!"

"*Dad?"* This time the voice was faltering but undeniably that of his daughter, and Taka bit his lip, swallowing hard.

"Hikari-chan." He murmured. "But…"

"*Dad… I'm sorry."* Hikari spoke slowly, and he could hear the uneven note of apprehension in her tones. *"About what I did. And… and that I… I'm not coming back. Not yet. I… I can't come back… but… Chichiri and Tasuki are looking after me. And I… I'm all right. I promise… I'm all right."*

"What do you mean, not coming back?" Taka exclaimed. "Have you any idea how worried your mother and I have been about you?"

"*I have to stay here."* Hikari's voice shook now, and Taka could tell she was fighting tears. *"I… I miss you, Dad. And Mum. And I'm really sorry for what I said, too. And if you hate me now, I… I guess I'll understand, but… Kounan… if I go back, everyone in Kounan will… so I can't. I have to stay here. I have to help*."

"Hikari…"

"*Mother made me her Shinzahou, didn't she?"* Hikari's voice was now no more than a whisper, as Taka strained to hear every word. *"So I can't not do it. It's something I have to do — because you and she made me ShinzahouSuzaku… Kounan… they need me, Dad. And so I… I can't come back. Not yet. I… I can't."*

"Hikari-chan…"

"*We'll take care of her, Taka. I promise."* Chichiri's voice came now, and Taka was faintly comforted by the gentle sincerity in his tones. *"You have faith in Tasuki and I to do that, don't you? We'll look after her, and make sure she's all right. She's a good girl, your daughter… you should be proud of her. You and Miaka both."*

He sighed.

"I can't hold the spell any longer." He admitted. "*Don't worry,*

Tamahome-kun. Your daughter will be fine — I promise!"

With that, the glimmer around the alarm clock's plastic shell faded, and Taka was dimly aware that he was once more alone in the little bedroom. Tears glittered on his cheeks as he digested what had happened, struggling in his mind to work out whether or not it had been real.

"Was that truly… Chichiri?" He murmured. "Is Hikari really…? But… what did he mean, space and time? Why is the book repelling me? Why are the pages black — what's going to happen to my daughter?"

"Taka?" Keisuke's voice from the doorway startled him and he glanced up, sending his brother in law a dazed look.

"Hrm?"

"Taka, why are you clutching Hikari's clock like that — and why are you talking to yourself?" Keisuke asked softly. "I know you're worried — but really, you have to…"

"She's inside the book." Taka interrupted, glancing at the clock and then setting it down on the bedside cabinet. "I… spoke to her, Keisuke. She was… there. In Kounan. With… Chichiri."

"How the hell?" Keisuke's eyebrows shot up, and Taka shrugged his shoulders.

"Some kind of spell." He murmured. "Chichiri opened some kind of connection between this world and that one. I don't know how. But Hikari was there. And she… she's alive. But she… isn't coming home. She… Kounan… is in trouble. And she… she's going to stay there. And… and fight."

"She's her mother's daughter after all." Keisuke grimaced. "Although she probably inherited it just as much from you as she did Miaka. Are you certain, Taka? You do look tired — you're sure that that's what happened?"

"Yes." Taka eyed the clock with a frown.

"Then that means they must have something of Hikari's in that world — something they used as a medium to communicate… doesn't that mean you can contact her?"

"I don't… I don't know." Taka admitted. "Chichiri said it wasn't easy to cast his spell… as if there was something in his way. The book is dead, and I can't go into it… so I don't know what that means. But I don't think it's as easy to reach her as it was for you to reach Miaka or

for Saori to reach Mayo. We're not able to follow what she's doing in the book this time, because of what's happening to the pages. As if where Hikari is isn't even really there…"

"Or it was there, but it isn't now." Keisuke's eyes narrowed, and Taka stared at him.

"Pardon me?"

"The book world moves differently from our world where time is concerned." He said carefully. "We both know that probably a lot of time passed in that world, since Hikari was born. Yet you said Chichiri cast the spell. Did he sound old, Taka?"

"No… he sounded much as ever, to be honest." Taka looked surprised. "I hadn't thought about that — but you're right."

"So what if Hikari hasn't gone back into the book as it is now?" Keisuke asked. "What if somehow she's gone back into the book — in a completely different time zone to the one we're in now?"

"Meaning that her tale has played out in the book, but it's long since been finished?" Taka demanded. "And that we can't find it now, because it ran while the book was in storage and noone ever saw it?"

"Maybe." Keisuke frowned. "It all seems mad to me, to be honest. But you keep saying — Miaka keeps saying — that Hikari is the Shinzahou. And those things are pretty powerful, right?"

"Hikari's never had any powers, Keisuke."

"Nor do you, in this world. Just confused memories." Keisuke reminded him. "But Hikari's not like you, Taka. You were reborn — modified — to fit this world's requirements. Hikari's a girl of this world, but even before she was born, Suzaku's power was sealed inside of her. She's a girl of *both* worlds — and maybe it makes her capable of things there that she's not capable of here."

"Which means that Chichiri and the others need her to save Kounan?" Taka breathed. "My daughter's going to be the third Suzaku no Miko?"

"Guess it's possible." Keisuke shrugged. "We can't rule it out, can we?"

"But it's dangerous! I should be able to protect her, at least!"

"As a father or as a Seishi?" Keisuke asked wryly. "Taka, there's nothing you can do. Whether we're right or we aren't, you can't get back into the book. You'll have to rely on Chichiri and Tasuki, if

they're the ones who're looking after her. If she really is there, you'll have to have faith in them. And in her, Taka. You'll have to have faith in her, too."

Taka sighed, slowly nodding his head as he realised the truth in his companion's words.

"I… I guess so."

"Now you know how I felt, when Miaka disappeared into the book the first time."

"At least you knew what she was doing." Taka objected. "I can't follow Hikari's progress at all. I don't know if she's safe or if she isn't. She can die in that world, Keisuke, just as Suboshi and Nakago died in this one. You realise that, don't you? She's not immune to that."

"I know." Keisuke looked grave. "But Taka, she is your daughter. Miaka's daughter. At the end of the day, I think that'll count for something."

"Maybe." Taka rubbed his temples. "Well… at least I can tell Miaka we know where she is. And that I've spoken to her — that she's with Chichiri and Tasuki. That gives me some comfort at least… I guess if she's in the book, there's noone better for her to be with."

"Exactly." Keisuke nodded encouragingly. 'And meantime, you can stop and think up some explanation for Hikari's school as to why she's absent today, can't you? Her morning classes will be beginning soon — you better start thinking, unless you want "disappearing into a book world' to go on her permanent record."

"How about going to the library after curfew without permission?" Taka said ruefully. "All right. I suppose you're right. Call Miaka, will you? I'll ring the school and tell them that Hikari's not feeling well this morning. And just hope that she's back before the day is out!"

"Whew… that was tough, you know."

In the front room of the village farmhouse, Chichiri let out his breath in a rush, dropping Hikari's watch down onto the patterned *kesa* as he shot his young companion a rueful glance. "I've never tried to communicate through time before — it wasn't easy to do."

"I… guess not." Hikari faltered, then scooped up her watch, fastening it absently back around her wrist. "Thank you, Chichiri. At least now… they know. And they won't worry as much, I suppose."

Tears glittered on her lashes and she swallowed hard, biting her lip as she fought with her emotions. At the sight of her expression, Chichiri sighed, reaching across to hug her tightly.

"I'm sorry." He murmured. "I guess talking to Tama… Taka made you even more homesick, huh?"

"Yes." Hikari admitted, burying her head in the sorcerer's shoulder as the tears got the better of her. "I hate this, Chichiri. I hate feeling like this. And I hate most of all that I make crazy, silly decisions one minute and then want to retract them the next. I don't know what's going on in my head any more! When we rescued Meikyo, I was so focused. Now I just feel pathetic and stupid again. I guess Hikari's only strong when Suzaku's inside of her. Now he's gone again and I'm just sitting here crying like a baby."

Chichiri shook his head.

"If you doubt in yourself, you will fail much more easily. It's because you're expecting to, you know." He said matter-of-factly. He held her at arm's length, offering her a smile.

"Taiitsukun drummed that lesson into me when I first came under her tutelage." He added. "And I've always tried to keep it in mind. Being strong is a matter of mind, as much as it is a matter of body, you know."

"I suppose I've got a long way to go, then." Despite herself, Hikari smiled faintly, and Chichiri chuckled.

"Perhaps you have." He admitted. "But not today. For now we'll stay here, and you can catch your breath. It's been a manic week for us all, and you especially. You're not used to any of this, after all."

"Shishi, Jin and Tasuki have gone back to the mountain, haven't they?" Hikari murmured, and Chichiri nodded.

"Yes, for the time being." He agreed. "I think Tasuki wanted to make sure Anzu was all right, and that nothing had happened there, considering what had happened here. I think that the mountain is probably secure enough, though, with both Anzu and Kouji there to defend it… still, you can understand his concern. Tomorrow morning he's coming back here, though, and the three of us will go to Taikyoku-zan and speak to Taiitsukun about what to do next."

"Just the three of us? You, me and Tasuki?" Hikari looked startled. "Are we leaving Jin and Shishi out of things from now on?"

"That's not clear, yet, but Taikyoku-zan isn't exactly a place just

anyone can go." Chichiri pursed his lips. 'Only the Chosen of the Beast Gods can go there. Your mother did, of course. Your father, too. And you.' He grinned at her. "Suzaku no Shinzahou. But Jin and Shishi — brave and strong as they both are — are just ordinary bandits. And they can't go to the sacred mountain."

"I see." Hikari considered this. "All right, then."

She tilted her head on one side, eying him thoughtfully.

"Meikyo *is* all right now, isn't she?" She asked softly. Chichiri frowned.

"Her arm will heal." He agreed gravely. "But she's frightened, poor kid. She's never been in that position before — noone's ever tried to hurt her before. I gave her something gentle to ease her to sleep, and I'm hoping by the time she wakes she'll be feeling more herself. But it's a lot for an eight year old to handle — especially one who's never been exposed to fighting or violence on that scale before."

"Poor Meikyo." Hikari looked troubled. "And Aidou-san?"

"I'm quite all right, Hikari-chan." Aidou herself answered at that moment, and the two glanced up to see the woman of the house in the doorway. Her brow was bruised and mottling in blues and purples, but the colour had returned to her face and Hikari offered her a smile.

"I'm glad. I was worried about you, when you were knocked out on the ground like that."

"I'd like to teach the man who did this to us a lesson." Aidou admitted. "But no doubt he's miles from here by now."

"No doubt he's gone East." Chichiri reflected. "But that's all right. The further away he is from you all, Aidou, the happier I am."

He bit his lip, looking troubled.

"In those circumstances, I'm not sure what to do if Taiitsukun tells us we have to go travelling again." He admitted. "I don't want any of you hurt… I already feel to blame for this time."

"You left here to try and protect us, and if that's what you have to do, you have to do it." Aidou said pragmatically. "Next time, we'll be more prepared."

"Well, if you think there's danger, take the children and go to the mountain." Chichiri told her softly. "Even if you think you're overreacting. The bandits there will protect the Kashira's sister and nephew and niece as sure as they'd protect him or Shishi — you'd be

better off there than here."

"Maybe." Aidou frowned. "But there is the farm to consider, and besides, Eiju doesn't need to be encouraged… he already wants to be a bandit far too much."

"You *are* feeling better." Chichiri got to his feet, crossing the floor to take his wife's hands in his as he eyed her with a mixture of amusement and relief. "I'm glad to see it, Aidou-chan."

"Mm. I'll heal." Aidou nodded. "And so will Mei-chan, Hou Jun. She's shaken now, but she's her father's daughter — remember? She'll fight back. Although she was asking for you before she fell asleep — you and Hikari both, actually."

"Me too?" Hikari looked startled, and Aidou nodded.

"Meikyo seems to have taken to you doubly since you came to her rescue this morning." She agreed. "She's lost to the world now, poor mite, but when she wakes, I think she'd appreciate it if you went and spoke to her. She really has adopted you as her big sister… whether you're ready for it or not."

"I don't mind." A smile touched Hikari's lips. "I guess, while I'm in this world, I'll be her Oneechan. If she likes."

"While you're here, you're an honorary member of the Ri family, Hikari-chan." Chichiri told her seriously. "Both Meikyo and I have a lot to be thankful to you for, and I haven't forgotten why it is you're remaining here in the first place. Our home is yours for as long as you need it — isn't it, Aidou?"

"Without a doubt." Aidou nodded, dusting her hands absently on her apron. "While you're in Kounan, Hikari, you're always welcome with us."

"Thank you." Hikari flushed at this. "I don't know if I'm as brave or as strong as you think, but I'm grateful anyway. You've been so kind to me already."

"And you helped bring my husband and my daughter safely home to me." Aidou crossed the room, touching Hikari gently on the cheek. "I told you I had faith in you, Hikari-sama — that everything would be all right, now you were here. And I believe it twice as much now. You are here to save Kounan — of that I have no doubt."

"Where is Eiju?" Chichiri wondered at this juncture. "The house seems awfully quiet… he's not gone to the mountain with Tasuki, has he?"

“Definitely not.” Aidou shook her head emphatically. “No. He’s out the back, piling firewood. He wasn’t too keen to do it first thing, but now he’s all gung-ho about ‘helping Papa’. I think what happened frightened him — and he’s old enough to feel that he wanted to do more to protect us. He’s growing up fast — I think he’s trying to be man of the house a little, now. He was really shaken by Meikyo’s abduction.”

“He’s only twelve. There’s no hurry.” Chichiri reflected, and Aidou shrugged her shoulders.

“Twelve is moving closer to adulthood.” She reflected. “Perhaps it’s time he did learn to do more than just play with wooden swords.”

“You think so?” Chichiri sighed. “I’m hoping that if we save Kounan this time, he won’t ever need to use one. But… if that’s what you think… he’ll have to go to the mountain. I’ve never wielded a sword, and I don’t intend on starting now.”

“Eiju can’t protect himself with spells like you can, Hou Jun.” Aidou said frankly. “And teaching him his letters might get him a good job in Souun or somewhere roundabout, but it won’t help him chase raiders and villains away from the farm. You should give it some thought — after all, he’s twelve now, but in five or six years he might be bringing home a bride.”

“I don’t deal in blades.” Chichiri said firmly. “But I will speak to Tasuki, if you like. I’m sure he or Kouji would be happy to give the boy some lessons in how to wield a sword, if you think he needs to learn.”

Hikari eyed the couple with a faint smile, sitting back against the wall as she surveyed them.

“You two are so different from Mother and Father.” She murmured. “They never have conversations like this.”

“How do you mean?” Chichiri eyed her in confusion, and Hikari shrugged.

“Worrying about my future, or Makoto’s.” She responded. “I have major exams at school this year, but neither Mother nor Father seem too worried whether or not I pass or what school I get into. And Makoto’s the brainiac of the family — without a doubt — but even though I’ve heard both Uncle Keisuke and Uncle Tetsuya tease him about top league colleges, Mum always just laughs it off and says he’s not old enough to worry about things like that. Makoto’s the same age as Eiju, you know… but Aidou-san, you talk about him like he’s

almost an adult. Makoto… well, me too… I guess it seems a lot more like we're children."

"People grow up too fast in this world, that's a fact." Chichiri said ruefully. "They have to, you know. It's a matter of survival."

"I suppose." Hikari rested her chin in her hands. "It's not just here, though. Shishi's a year younger than I am, isn't she? But she seems as old as me, or older. And she said that she could even be married in a year or two, if she wanted to be. She thought the idea horrific, and so did I. Married at fifteen or sixteen? I couldn't even imagine it."

"I was engaged at eighteen." Chichiri reflected. "Although… I didn't actually marry until I was twenty seven."

He paused, casting Aidou a rueful glance, which was met by an amused smile.

"I was twenty four." She agreed. "Although like Hou Jun, I was betrothed once before to a man who died during the war with Kutou. We were both rather unusual in that — I'd all but given up on finding a husband, to be truthful, until I stumbled into Suzaku's business and encountered Hou Jun as more than just my stupid brother's Seishi comrade. Marrying young isn't uncommon in these parts. Shun'u was nineteen when he allowed Anzu to go to the mountain — and she was seventeen, I think… she can't have been much older."

"Shishi said that, too." Hikari remembered. "But how can you know, that young, whether or not you're always going to love someone?"

"This sounds like it's a question with a personal edge, Hikari-chan." Chichiri regarded her thoughtfully, sitting back on his hands as he eyed her keenly. "Is this something to do with Miaka and Tama… Taka's connection?"

"No… well, not exactly, although I guess it happened for them in the same kind of way… Mum was fifteen when she met Dad, I know that for sure now." Hikari bit her lip. "I just… I thought I liked this guy back home, right? I really thought I did. But since I've been here, I've… I've thought about everything else. Every*one* else. Even my damn brother, who I always fight with. But not Haru-kun. So now I wonder… do I even like him all that much after all? It's confusing. How can you tell whether or not you love someone, anyway?"

"I think when you do, Hikari-chan, you just know." Chichiri said reflectively. "It has a habit of creeping up on you, I think. But you'll know when it does… I'm sure of that. You don't need to worry about

it too much just at the moment. When you go back to your world, I'm sure things will be clearer. And after all, like you said, things are different there. Just because Aidou and I are talking like this doesn't mean the same applies to you. You're a special case, you know?"

"Perhaps." Hikari drew her knees up to her chin, hugging them tightly as she considered. "I suppose things do just work differently in this world from mine. I guess it must have been really hard at first, then, for Dad to live in that one. Mustn't it? He must have had to have learnt a lot of new things."

"It's complicated, you know." Chichiri pursed his lips. "Suzaku's work often is. It was Miaka's final wish to Suzaku — for them to be together, somehow. And Suzaku did his best to grant it. Sukunami Taka was the solution to the problem — as I said, it's difficult to really understand the process. But I'm sure it wasn't as hard as all that — considering that he was with Miaka."

"I suppose so." Hikari sighed. "Maybe one day I'll feel like that about someone. It's… sort of romantic, when you think about it like that. I always thought Mum and Dad were annoyingly devoted to one another. But I guess… now I know a little more about what they had to overcome to be together… it's not so bad."

"I don't think truly being in love with someone is bad." Chichiri shrugged his shoulders. "So long as noone gets hurt in the meantime."

He smiled.

"Well, you have the rest of the afternoon to do as you please." He added with a grin. "I'm sure you don't want to stay here and be roped into helping Aidou with the herbs, when you've been through as much as you have of late. Is there something you'd like to do?"

"Do?" Hikari looked blank, and Aidou smiled.

"Why not take her to Souun, Hou Jun?" She suggested. "There are a few things I need, in any case… and as for the herbs, they're all done — while you've been away, I've been able to keep Meikyo's attention more on the farm than on scribbling on bits of parchment. Besides, if Hikari's staying in Kounan, she'll need something to wear while she's here. You might be hopeless with such things — but I'm sure that choosing fabric for clothing is a girl's talent in every world."

"Clothing?" Hikari started. "But… won't that be expensive? And I… I don't have any…"

"I told you. You're part of the family." Aidou shook her head. "And besides, we have a trade agreement with a supplier in Souun."

She smiled again, her bronze eyes twinkling.

“He receives fabric direct from the capital.” She added. “From one of the most well known emporia in the Textile Quarter. It’s always been an unspoken agreement between us and them… since Hou Jun’s an old friend of the Chou family’s second son.”

“An… old friend?” Hikari looked bewildered. “I… I see.”

“Nuriko’s real name was Chou Ryuuen, and his family run that warehouse in Eiyou.” Chichiri explained. “And its like Aidou said. Nuriko has one surviving brother — Rokou — who runs the business these days, since his father’s retirement and his mother’s death. He’s… not really much like his brother, to be honest, but he’s a good man nonetheless. The business has blossomed under his control, because he’s such a careful, precise kind of man when it comes to detail — and they’ve outsourced to suppliers in various other cities in the near area. Because of my connection to Nuriko, it’s always been an understanding between us. You needn’t worry too much about cost — it’s been arranged that way for years, and it’s always proven helpful. In some respects its an alliance built out of former acquaintance, but it’s more than that.”

He shrugged.

“When Nuriko died, we buried him on Koku-zan, in Hokkan.” He added. “We didn’t have a chance to return him home to his family, which was a matter of some friction for a while. But I projected a spell around his resting place — a barrier to preserve it and the wood that marks it from the elements of Hokkan’s weather. So no matter where he lies, noone can ever disturb his remains. In some respects, Rokou’s agreement with my family stems from that — my continued protection of his brother’s final resting place. But in truth, I would do it, regardless. Nuriko was a close friend of mine, after all — I’d have done it for any of them, if it was the last thing I could do for them in this world.”

He sighed.

“The Chou family are very wealthy, these days. Fortunately, they’re of the generous persuasion, and more than once Rokou has been convinced to supply warm cloth for many of the villages around these parts during the winter months.”

“He sounds nice.” Hikari smiled. “I see. I suppose being a Seishi means you have connections all over the place. Like Tamatama-san in Yukigase.”

“Yes. Good and bad, as you’re finding out.” Chichiri reflected ruefully. “And we could go to Souun. But… I’m not sure I should leave the house so soon after…”

He trailed off, and Aidou shook her head.

“You said it yourself. The man’s gone East.” She said softly. “Take her, Hou Jun. It’s all right.”

“I’ll protect Okaasan and Mei-chan, Papa.” At that moment, Eiju emerged from the outhouse, his face smudged with dirt and sweat from his wood-piling exertions. “I promise. I’ll protect them this time… I won’t let anyone come and hurt Mei-chan again.”

At the sight of the determination on Eiju’s face, Chichiri laughed, getting to his feet as he touched his son gently on the shoulder.

“Very well.” He agreed lightly. “We won’t be away long — I’ll use the *kasa*, and I’ll put a barrier around the house — from Souun, I should be able to keep it strong enough to ward against most trouble, in any case.”

“Then it’s decided.” Aidou glanced at Hikari. “Well?”

“All… all right.” Hikari nodded her head. “It would be nice, and maybe… I could bring something back for Mei-chan, too?”

“I think she’d like that.” Hou Jun grinned, holding out his hand to his wife and she grimaced at him, producing a scrawled-on scrap of parchment.

“Here.” She said frankly. “Everything on it is important, especially if you want to eat tonight.”

“Understood.” Amusement flickered in Chichiri’s ruby eyes. “Okay, Hikari-chan. Hold on tightly — we’re on our way.”

Chapter 18

Chapter Seventeen

“Kikei-sama, why the summons so early in the morning?”

Kintsusei pushed open the door of the Seiryuu shrine, casting the priest a look of confusion as he stepped into the central chamber, Hyoushin not far behind him. The glittering azure eyes of the golden sea dragon stared down at him, as if watching his progress, and he frowned, rubbing his temples as the ghost-like Meihi carefully re-fastened the door behind them, standing against it as if ready to ward off any sign of trouble.

“Has something occured that I should be aware of?”

“Yes, sire. My apologies — I realise it is early yet.” The aging priest bowed his head, anticipation in his expression as he met the Emperor’s tired gaze. “But in the circumstances, I thought you’d want to be aware as soon as possible. I have good news.”

“Good news?” Kintsusei stared, suddenly forgetting his early morning fatigue as he gazed at the Priest in hope. “Do you mean…?”

He trailed off, and Kikei’s smile widened, as he extended a hand towards the back of the shrine, clicking his fingers. As if hazing out of the shadows, a figure emerged, pausing to bow before the Emperor as he did so.

“Miramu!” Kintsusei’s eyes widened, and Kikei nodded.

“Yes, sire.” He agreed softly. “Miramu has returned from his mission in Kounan — and I think you’ll be happy about the result.”

“You… have it, then?” Kintsusei asked falteringly, turning his gaze on the assassin, who chuckled, slipping his hand into the dark folds of his outfit to produce the small black casket. Carefully he opened it, and Kintsusei let out a gasp as he registered the glittering earring that lay nestled carefully within.

“Seiryuu no Shinzahou.” He whispered. “Even from here, I can feel the God’s magic resonating within it.”

“How many throats had to be slit in the pursuit of this treasure, I wonder?” Hyoushin observed acidly from his post at the door. “Are we to expect the wrath of Kounan’s Emperor on our heads for this,

Miramu? Or did you actually manage to control your lust for blood in the delicate nature of this mission?"

"Well, if it isn't Hyoushin!" Amusement flared in Miramu's unusual eyes, and he laughed, shrugging his shoulders. "You don't change, do you? As stoic and cold as ever… the veritable marble statue that haunts the halls of this palace. You should be careful of that, my friend — one day someone might mistake you for a stone carving and try to polish you."

"You might answer the question, rather than attempting to be humorous." Hyoushin said evenly, crossing the floor until he stood a mere few feet from the assassin, meeting his gaze coolly. "The Suzaku Shichi Seishi in possession of this treasure — were they still alive when you left them?"

"My orders were to take the treasure without slaying the men of the Phoenix." Miramu said simply. "I am capable of following instructions, Hyoushin. Yes, they live. It was not in my brief to kill them, and with a little persuasion, they relinquished the Shinzahou to me of their own free will."

"Good." Kintsusei looked relieved, holding his hand out for the box, and Miramu passed it over, a smirk touching his features.

"You shouldn't underestimate my ability to persuade." He added. "I'm very good at it. And so long as I'm well paid, I'm more than happy to put my skills to your purpose, Koutei-heika."

"Indeed." Kintsusei acknowledged, closing the casket with a snap and offering the assassin a smile. "I'm gratified that you took such note of my final instruction to you, Miramu… about not spilling unecessary blood. Kutou can ill afford war with Kounan at present, after all. Kikei said I could trust your discretion, and it seems his judgement is sound. You have done well… and you will be paid according to the terms Kikei promised you. You have my word as Emperor."

"Then I am more than happy to do your bidding, Koutei-sama." Miramu bobbed his head half-mockingly once more. "I suppose this means that Hyoushin and I might be able to re-kindle our acquaintance a little, also — which will be pleasant. It's been a few years, hasn't it, Hyoushin? Two, at the very least."

"I have no desire to renew anything with you, and there is nothing to renew." Hyoushin shot him an icy look. "I did not approve of your presence here then, and I do not now. Just because you have operated on Kikei-sama's orders and just because your tactics in deception and

betrayal brought down a significant insurgency leader, I still do not believe in your way of doing things. You are not the kind of man that can be trusted."

"I'm hurt." Miramu looked anything but hurt, leaning up lazily against the arching figure of the dragon as he did so. "Thanks to my intervention, you were saved a full out battle with the loss of many lives, isn't that so? Isn't that why you agreed to have Kikei deploy me in the first place? You should be thanking me, Commander… you have precious few men you can call fully loyal to Kutou, or am I mistaken?"

Hyoushin met his gaze impassively, and Miramu laughed.

"As cold and silent as the grave, just as ever." He murmured. "Very well. If that's how you feel, I won't push the issue any further."

"So that's how the two of you have encountered each other before." The Emperor looked thoughtful. "It seems a lot of things go on behind my back."

"Not really, my Lord." Hyoushin shook his head. "You were aware that troops were mobilised to fight the direct rebel threat two summers ago. And you were aware that the rebel leader suffered a fatal spasm, breaking up the insurgence. He transgressed into crown lands and provided a significant threat to your life… in order to prevent bloodshed within the palace of a widespread nature, I was forced to accept Kikei's suggestion and let Miramu be involved in a coward's game of cat and mouse. It was a carrying out of duty as your chief protector… although if you feel I was remiss in not reporting it to you in full, you have my apologies. At the time you were in considerably ill health, you may remember, following the previous battle encounter… it was the only way to resolve the situation, and allow you to recover from your injuries in order to resume control."

He bowed his head.

"You did, after all, grant me the right to act against the enemy in your name." He added softly.

"It's all right." Kintsusei held up his hands. "I trust your judgement, especially where the soldiers are concerned, and I know you would only act in my and Kutou's best interests. And besides, I'm aware of Miramu's unique talents now… unique indeed, and to our benefit once again. In light of that, I'm willing to consider him an ally. He has, after all, revealed his hand to us — he is a paid mercenary, as many soldiers are. And so long as we meet his demands, he will, I'm sure, meet ours."

“Your Emperor is a wise man, Hyoushin.” Miramu reflected. “He understands the rules of business better than you do, it seems.”

“Kikei, now we have the Shinzahou, we can raise Suiko fully from the relic, can’t we?” Kintsusei asked, and Kikei nodded.

“Yes, and I have already begun to prepare the spell.” He agreed. “You are aware, my Lord, that Suiko is a powerful mage and she will operate on behalf of those who possess Seiryuu’s holy treasure. In light of that, you will have a strong ally — perhaps not as strong as Seiryuu himself, but one willing to fight to defend your cause. And now, with the possession of this artefact, there is no turning back. In order to save Kutou, you must pursue all the avenues, not just those belonging to Kutou.”

He narrowed his eyes.

“You must accumulate more strength.” He added. “So long as the other lands possess their Shinzahou, they can still pose you a threat. And now we know Kounan is mobilised to be potentially hostile… it’s not a risk we can take.”

“Then we must raise Suiko, at once.” Kintsusei decided. “And ask her further advice.”

“As you wish, my Lord.” Kikei bowed his head, stretching his hands out for the Shinzahou, which the Emperor relinquished, watching with eager, hopeful eyes as his elderly Priest prepared his spell once again. The scale still sat in its alcove and now, with gentle, careful hands, Kikei placed the Shinzahou alongside it, clasping his hands together as he closed his eyes. The words of a spell passed softly from his lips, and almost before he had finished speaking, the flame flared into life once more. As it did so, Kikei drew his hands sharply over the top of the two holy relics, and as he did so, the flame exploded into a burst of blue light that made the Emperor let out an exclamation, covering his eyes from the glare.

As the light faded, he peered cautiously back towards the fire, his breath catching in his throat as he registered the outline of a woman standing before the statue of the sea dragon. No longer a ghost in the flame, as the moments passed she became more and more vivid, her azure hair flowing across her shoulders like wild sea waves and her eyes as deep as underground cave pools. Mesmerised, Kintsusei could only stare at her, and at his expression, the woman let out an amused laugh, the sound like a cascading waterfall as she dropped to her knees before him.

“Kutou no Koutei-sama, I am Suiko of Seiryuu.” She said softly, her

voice gentle and rippling like the lap of waves on a beach. “The guardian of the Eastern lands. So I was blessed to be by the Azure Dragon. In what way might I serve Kutou, and the one who possesses my master’s holy treasure?”

“Suiko.” Kintsusei breathed, holding out his hands to her, and she cocked her head on one side, reaching up to brush his fingers with her own.

“Indeed.” She agreed. “Does something trouble you, my Lord? Am I less than you expected?”

“No… not at all.” Kintsusei gathered himself hurriedly, pulling her gently to her feet. “You do not need to bow before me, Suiko no Seiryuu. You are the representative of the God I serve… therefore there is no reason to bow to me.”

“You are Seiryuu’s representative in Kutou… the one who seeks to protect it with his heart and soul.” Suiko shook her head. “Therefore you are my master, and your orders I will obey. You have brought Seiryuu’s treasure to me, so I know your intentions are true. What is your wish, Emperor of Kutou? What would you have me do?”

Kintsusei frowned, eying the mage for a moment as he considered.

“Suiko, when you were in the flame, you could trace the whereabouts of the Seiryuu Shinzahou.” He said softly. “Can you also sense the whereabouts of other Shinzahou? And tell me whether, in order to save Kutou, we need pursue the locations of these treasures? Can you help me save my country, or do we need to go a step further?”

Suiko frowned, a strange, blue light glimmering across her aura as she digested his question. Slowly she shook her head.

“I am Seiryuu’s mage.” She said softly. “I am not able to trace the whereabouts of the other beast gods or their treasures unless they are very close by. Such a power does not befit the Guardian of the East. However…”

She tilted her head on one side, casting him a playful smile.

“You wish to raise my master Seiryuu, do you not?” She asked. Kintsusei nodded.

“Yes… if it’s the only way to save Kutou.”

“Indeed.” Suiko shrugged, spreading her hands. “Very well, then. I cannot tell you where they lie, but I can tell you this. If you can bring together all four of the Shinzahou belonging to the Beast Gods, you

will have the power to summon Seiryuu and grant your wishes for Kutou's future."

"All four…?" Hyoushin frowned. "So we are indeed going to have to set out on more journeys, then? Have I misunderstood the legend — I thought that a Miko was required in order to summon the beast Gods at all?"

"You're an interesting one." Suiko crossed the floor towards him, placing her finger against his cheek as he shied back from her touch. "You do not like me, do you, man of the North? You are closed to me… you do not share your companion's faith in Seiryuu's ability to save Kutou."

"I believe in the work of men, not the divine." Hyoushin said flatly. "I have never seen any divine benefit in my lifetime… from any God, Kutou's or otherwise."

His eyes narrowed.

"And I am a man of the East. Not a man of the North." He added softly. "This is the land of my birth and the land to which my loyalties are sworn. I am not interested in Hokkan. I seek peace for Kutou, just as my Lord Emperor does."

"I like you." Suiko decided, a mischievous smile touching her lips. She turned back to the Emperor.

"Koutei-sama, this one is intelligent, even if he is cold." She remarked. "Will you follow my advice, and send him to find the other treasures?"

"He raises a good point, though." Kintsusei reflected. "About the need for a Priestess. How can we bring a girl here — one from the world beyond this one? It's not possible… is it?"

"If you assemble all four Shinzahou, such a Miko will be revealed to you." Suiko's eyes glimmered with sapphire light. "I cannot tell you how, or when, or what she will look like. But whilst I cannot feel the Shinzahou of my master's brethren, I can sense one to whom Seiryuu has a connection. Seiryuu no Miko will come, but only when you have brought all four treasures to Kutou."

She shrugged.

"I will do what is in my power to assist you." She added. "As Seiryuu's representative, I have power over the rivers and seas, and I put this at your disposal."

Her eyes twinkled, as she shot Hyoushin another amused look.

“I would like to accompany this one on his journey.” She added. “Being stuck in a shrine here is so boring, and I might be able to help. After all, I’ve slept for far too long — I’m dying to get out a little and see the world.”

“My Lord…?” Hyoushin raised an eyebrow, and Kintsusei sighed.

“Suiko’s powers are needed here, but then again, they are also needed in the location of the other Shinzahou.” He murmured. “If what she says is true — if Seiryuu no Miko will come, then… then we have no choice but to do as she says. It’s as Kikei originally advised me — that in the absence of Seiryuu Shichi Seishi, the only way to save Kutou is to amass the treasures. His portents and Suiko’s have been the same… I believe that this is the path we should follow.”

Hyoushin sighed, but nodded his head.

“You wish, then, for me to return to Hokkan?” He asked softly.

“Hokkan?” Suiko shivered. “Brr. Cold, just as you are, man of the North.”

Hyoushin’s eyes narrowed, but he ignored her remark, casting the Emperor a quizzical look, and Miramu chuckled.

“She has known you ten seconds and she already has you summed up. That shows how strong her spiritual power is, Hyoushin.” He said, amused. “But I wouldn’t be in such a hurry to go to the North again, if I were you. I think… you might have better luck… in the West.”

“The West?” Kintsusei frowned, staring at him in confusion. “But… Sairou is the hardest land to reach from Kutou — to get there Hyoushin would have to cross either Hokkan or Kounan — why do you say such a thing, Miramu?”

“Because you don’t know where Hokkan’s Shinzahou is, nor Kounan’s.” Miramu shrugged his shoulders. “But I know where Sairou’s is. And the location of Byakko’s fang relic, known as *Kitora*.”

He winked.

“For a price, I might be willing to share that information.” He added. “In the name of such a good cause.”

“You’d sell out your homeland’s holy treasure for money?” Hyoushin asked quietly, and Miramu shrugged his shoulders again.

“I came to Kutou because it’s as far from Sairou as you can get while still remaining in the four lands.” He said softly. “I have my own reasons, and they are to your benefit. Besides, can you afford to refuse

my knowledge? Without my help, I doubt you'd get very far… Sairou is a hot desert land, and even with Suiko-sama's water related magic, I expect you'd find it tough going."

He grinned.

"On the other hand… I could lead you almost to it." He said evenly. "Having two Shinzahou and the power to raise Byakko's mage… would surely be a stronger defence against invasion from the South?"

"Miramu… you are sure about this? That you know where these things are hidden?" Kintsusei asked softly. Miramu nodded.

"I do." He agreed. "And I have no overriding loyalty to any land or Beast God — only to who pays my fees. I would gladly reveal this to you, Koutei-sama, for the right price. There are only two conditions I might ask you to humour, if I was to return to Sairou."

"Ah. Here we are. The conditions." Hyoushin's lips thinned, and Miramu laughed, shaking his head.

"No… you shouldn't be so suspicious." He chided. "They're quite simple. As a man of Sairou, I will not enter the place where Byakko's Shinzahou lies. To betray the beast God within my own land would carry a harsh penalty if I was to be observed — and I will not face the Guardian of the Shinzahou. I will take you there, but I will not fight to secure it for you. This is my first condition."

His eyes narrowed, clouding and concealing his true emotions for the briefest of moments.

"There is a tale in Sairou that if one kills the Guardian of Byakko's Shinzahou, another of the Tiger's chosen will hunt down and slay her killers." He added in soft tones. "I imagine that in those circumstances, an assassin would be far from welcome."

"A genuine curse or an old wives' legend?" Hyoushin asked quietly, and Miramu offered him a wry smile.

"I believe it." He said evenly. "I believe it very strongly — that if Byakko's Guardian died, someone would be out for revenge."

"We've gained Seiryuu's Shinzahou without spilling Seishi blood." Kintsusei said with a frown. "I imagine the same can be said of Byakko's, Miramu. Don't worry about that — we don't seek war with the Western lands, either… your concerns are understood. But you said two conditions. What is the second?"

"That while in the West, I have the protection of Kutou's entourage, Kintsusei-sama." Miramu bowed his head in the Emperor's direction.

“As I’m sure you can imagine, an assassin generates enemies, and there are people in Sairou who would like to see me strung up in a village square. Naturally, I would rather not be in that situation.”

“They seem fair enough conditions to me, if you can indeed lead Hyoushin and his men to the Shinzahou.” Kintsusei pondered, then nodded. “Very well. Your terms are met, Miramu.”

He rubbed his chin, as if musing over the situation.

“I think it might be better all round to dispatch you by sea this time, Hyoushin, rather than send you through the lands.” He added. “With Suiko’s gifts over the water, it should be a smooth and simpler form of transport than the risk of the snowlands or the hostility in the south.”

“By boat?” Hyoushin pursed his lips. “Very well, if that is your wish, my Lord. I have but one question.”

“Yes?”

“May I once more select my own soldiers to accompany us on the trip West?” Hyoushin asked. “I understand you wish Suiko-sama and Miramu to accompany me, but otherwise — do I have the freedom to choose my own men?”

“As ever.” Kintsusei agreed. “In this matter, your judgement is your own.”

“I understand.” Hyoushin bowed his head. “Then with your Highness’s permission, I will withdraw to brief the soldiers. I anticipate as quick a departure as possible… and will await your final pleasure.”

With that he withdrew, and Miramu shook his head, looking amused.

“He really doesn’t want me to go with him, does he?” He reflected aloud. “That makes it fun.”

“He will act as Kutou requires him.” Kintsusei said thoughtfully. “With Sairou’s treasure, we will be stronger indeed. But to bring Seiryuu no Miko to Kutou… we must go further. I must have your word, Miramu, that you will not be lured away by any enemy to serve their cause while we seek these treasures.”

“Koutei-sama, so long as you are paying my fee, I have no need to stray.” A lazy smile flickered at the corners of Miramu’s lips. “You have my word, as much as an assassin ever promises, to do the bidding of Kutou.”

“Then I suppose I must trust in that.” Kintsusei reflected. “Very well. Then I wish you luck.”

“I’m sure luck has nothing to do with it.” Miramu’s eyes narrowed for a moment, then he shook his head. “But I’ll do my best to make sure Byakko’s Shinzahou is taken away from Sairou.”

His lips thinned, and he nodded his head, his indigo eyes hardening as if remembering something.

“Yes. On that you *do* have my word.”

“Hikari-neesan? Hikari-neesan? Wake up! Uncle Wolf is here and he an’ Papa want to speak to you!”

Hikari opened her eyes, blinking against the bright sunlight as for a moment she struggled to work out where she was. Then, as she registered her small companion, she remembered that they had returned to the Eastern Village and that she was safe within the walls of Chichiri’s farmhouse home. As she pulled herself into a sitting position, rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she cast her young visitor a searching gaze. At first glance Meikyo did not look any the worse for wear for her encounter, her thick reddish waves pulled back from her face with a blue ribbon and her ruby eyes sparkling with excitement. However, a thick white bandage swathed her lower right arm, concealing the wound inflicted by the ruthless assassin, and Hikari was once more reminded of how serious a game they had all become involved in.

“Morning, Meikyo.” She said with a smile. “How are you this morning?”

“I’m all right.” Meikyo looked surprised. She smiled back, holding out her arm. “Papa bandaged it and it doesn’t hurt any more. He says it will be all better soon, so it’s okay.”

“Good.” Hikari reached across to take the tiny fingers in hers, squeezing the hand gently. “We were worried about you.”

“I was scared.” Meikyo admitted. “But Papa came, and Hikari-neesan, too. So then I knew I’d be all right. Papa works for Suzaku, and he has special magic powers that make him protect people, you know. And Hikari-neesan…”

She frowned, eying her companion curiously.

“Papa says *you* work for Suzaku, too, only you’re not a Seishi like he is so you didn’t get a special mark like his or Uncle Wolf’s.” She

murmured. “Is that true?”

“I suppose it is.” Hikari agreed ruefully.

“Do *you* have special powers too?”

“Well… sort of.” Hikari hesitated, then shrugged her shoulders. “In… in a way.”

“Then *that’s* why you came to visit us.” Meikyo said with a matter-of-fact sigh. “It makes sense, now.”

She cast her companion a grin, her reddish eyes lighting up.

“Thank you for coming to save me, Hikari-neesan.” She added. “I didn’t get to say thank you yesterday, but Kaa-san would say it was rude, if I didn’t say it to you now.”

“That’s all right.” Hikari assured her, hugging her young companion tightly. “You and your family have made me feel at home — it was like coming to rescue a little sister. I didn’t even think about doing it — I’m just glad you’re safe.”

“That man was evil, wasn’t he?”

“Yes.” Hikari pursed her lips. “But he won’t be coming back. He has what he wants, so you don’t need to be scared, Mei-chan. I don’t think you’ll see him again.”

“I’m not scared.” Meikyo shook her head. “Papa and Hikari-neesan will protect me. And Uncle Wolf, too. Because that’s what Suzaku’s people do.”

“I guess they do.” Hikari digested this, then she nodded. “All right, then. You said Tasuki was here? And that they’re waiting for me? I wonder if I have time to have breakfast before we go to Taikyoku-zan. I’m starving hungry this morning.”

“Kaa-san was cooking fish.” Meikyo told her. “I was helping, but Papa asked me to come wake you up.”

“Oh, that reminds me.” Hikari grinned, pushing back the covers and getting out of bed as she stretched her still sleepy muscles into cooperating with her wishes. “Yesterday, your father took me to Souun, and I brought something back for you and for Eiju. I gave his to him yesterday, but I haven’t seen you to speak to you till now, have I?”

“A present… for me?” Meikyo’s eyes widened, making her look even more young and innocent than ever, and despite herself Hikari laughed, nodding her head.

“Yes.” She agreed. “I thought it might make you feel better.”

She rummaged through the pile of discarded clothing, locating the small, wrapped parcel at the bottom, which she held out to her companion. “Here.”

Meikyo took it carefully, unwinding the paper little by little to reveal a small stitched doll, its black-fibre hair wound back from its face in a braid. For a moment she stared at it. Then she grinned.

“It’s Hikari-neesan!” She exclaimed.

“Pardon me?” Hikari looked non-plussed, and Meikyo thrust the doll forwards.

“Look… it’s Hikari-neesan.” She repeated. “It looks like you… it really really does!”

“I guess… maybe a little.” Hikari eyed it cautiously, then shrugged her shoulders, and Meikyo giggled.

“I’m glad you came to Kounan, Hikari-neesan.” She said, hugging the doll tightly to her chest as she slipped her free hand once more into her companion’s fingers. “Thank you for my present. I like that you’ve come to stay with us. Stay a long time, all right?”

“As things stand, I might be staying a long time.” Hikari grimaced, rubbing her temples. “Right now, though, I need to get dressed.”

“I’ll help!” Meikyo offered. “I’ll get you some water to wash with!”

With that she was gone, haring out of the room at top speed, and despite herself, Hikari smiled.

“She’s all right.” She murmured, remembering the expression on the girl’s face when she had been given the gift. “And… and it was worth it, what Jin and I decided to do yesterday. No matter what… no matter if I have to stay here… saving Meikyo was worth it. And that’s why I am still here. To make sure I do help both Meikyo *and* Eiju. This isn’t about strangers in strange lands any more. It’s about people I know and who I’m starting to care about. I guess that makes the difference.”

She glanced out of the window, seeing Eiju in the morning sunlight as he poked around with a stick in a suspiciously rodent-sized hole on the farm’s perimeter, and her smile widened.

“Well, maybe this world isn’t so bad after all.” She reflected. “I mean, for now. Dad knows where I am and he… didn’t sound that cross. So… so I guess I feel a little better… about being here like this.”

Once Meikyo returned, bearing her heavy burden, Hikari made quick work of getting up, hurrying down the steps to the front room as she wound a length of blue ribbon into her long dark hair. As she reached the bottom, she found Tasuki waiting for her, and at his expression, she offered him a rueful, apologetic smile.

“Sorry… I didn’t mean to keep you waiting.”

“You’re a girl — it’s par for the course.” Tasuki said resignedly. “Are you hungry? Chichiri’s wantin’ to head up to Taikyoku-zan as soon as possible, but…”

“I am hungry.” Hikari agreed. “But… we can go there by his magic, can’t we? Like he and I did the last time we went?”

“Yes.” Tasuki nodded.

“Then lets do that first. I can eat when we come back.” Hikari decided. “When I know exactly what the situation is.”

“All right.” Tasuki nodded, looking approving. “Hey, Chichiri! She’s here… are we going?”

“You don’t want breakfast first, Hikari-chan?” Chichiri emerged from the front room, and Hikari shook her head.

“I’d rather not eat and fly.” She admitted, and Tasuki laughed, patting her on the shoulder as he sent her an amused look.

“Already you’re used to Chichiri’s landin’ style.” He said, shooting his friend a grin, which was met by a rueful grimace. “Right then. Let’s get this over with, Chichiri — see what the old sand witch has to say about things this time around.”

“Will she be angry with me, for giving Miramu the Shinzahou?” Hikari asked, suddenly anxious as she pictured the wizened old woman and her piercing, knowing gaze. Chichiri shook his head.

“It’s not important now. What is is what we do next.” He said frankly. “Hold on tightly to my arm, Hikari. I’m about to cast the spell.”

Hikari did as she was bidden, closing her eyes as she felt herself being whisked up into Chichiri’s mysterious hat and the endless pool of darkness that seemed to be contained within it. She swallowed hard against the swirling sensation, but almost as soon as it had begun, the feeling was over and she found herself once more on the glittering, colourful landscape that was Taikyoku-zan.

“Well, so we meet again, Suzaku no Shinzahou.”

The creaking tones of the old hermit made her turn, meeting the woman's strange, all-seeing stare as she tried not to look intimidated or revolted. At her expression, Taiitsukun smiled, slowly shaking her head as she eyed her young companion thoughtfully.

"You seem to have become stronger since we last spoke." She ruminated. "But you have a long way to go."

"Taiitsukun, you probably already know what happened with Seiryuu's treasure." Chichiri said slowly, casting Hikari a glance as he did so. "In the circumstances, Hikari did what she thought was right, and I… can't blame her for it. Actually, as a father, I'm glad she did it, you know? But it does mean a complication — Hikari will not be able to go home yet, will she?"

"That decision lies with her." Taiitsukun said gravely. "As it always has."

"I'm not going home yet." Hikari shook her head. "I want to help, Taiitsukun. Is there a way that I can? If I… if I got stronger, could I… could I be Suzaku no Miko? Could I raise the God and grant Kounan's wishes?"

"You would have to gain a lot of strength before such a course of action would be even remotely possible." Came Taiitsukun's discouraging reply. "You are Suzaku's Shinzahou, but you are also a girl from the other world. To attempt to use your own power — even Suzaku's holy power — to take on both the roles of summoner and facilitator would require twice as much strength and dedication than that your mother or Mayo-sama possessed between them. To become Suzaku no Miko, you would have to surpass both of them, and probably the power of those that surround you, also. It is a tall order."

"But not impossible?" Hikari bit her lip.

Taiitsukun spread her hands.

"Perhaps not." She admitted. "Although I feel certain that it is not your destiny, Hikari. Miaka was Suzaku no Miko — you are not your mother."

"But that girl Mayo used the Shinzahou to summon Suzaku, though. And she just used Suzaku's Shinzahou — just Hikari." Tasuki objected. "Why would it be so crazy for Hikari to do it? The power's the same — I don't get it!"

"Mayo's strength and the Shinzahou's were separate, and even then Mayo required Miaka's help from the other world to carry out the summoning process." Taiitsukun said gravely. "Miaka was still Suzaku

no Miko in spirit and strength. Mayo was her vessel into this world — but there has only ever been one true Suzaku no Miko."

"But Hikari is from the other world." Chichiri remarked. "And so she could become a Miko… couldn't she? If Kounan is truly in the danger we know it is — couldn't she take on the mantle, even temporarily? She has Suzaku already inside her — would it really be so difficult to achieve?"

"Indeed." Taiitsukun nodded. "Hikari's strength and the Shinzahou's are the same thing. If she was to become Suzaku no Miko, she would have only herself to call upon."

"Then why is she in this world at all?" Tasuki demanded. "If she's not a Miko — is she really just here to be Suzaku's Shinzahou? 'Cause that means now she's here, that idiot in Kutou might try and grab her too, right? By coming here she's now a target for him. What good is there in her being here if they can try to steal her — if she can't raise Suzaku, what the hell are we doing gathering Shinzahou anyway?"

Taiitsukun shrugged.

"Certainly, at present, Hikari is not strong enough to use her power to defend your country." She acknowledged. "And I do not know whether she is able to become Suzaku no Miko… although, if Kounan were to possess the Shinzahou from Sairou or Hokkan, it may be enough to carry out your wishes."

"So if… we got… the other treasures…" Hikari frowned. "You mean, if we hadn't lost Seiryuu's Shinzahou, I could have…?"

"In the state you are now? No." Taiitsukun shook her head. "You have got stronger, child, but you are not yet near strong enough to summon a Beast God."

"So it doesn't matter, after all." Hikari sighed. "All right. So if we go to Hokkan or Sairou, and got one or both of their treasures, how would I be able to summon Suzaku then?"

"You may not be able to." Taiitsukun sent her an infuriating gaze. "As I said, Miaka was Suzaku no Miko. Miaka brought peace to Kounan. There is no call for Suzaku no Miko to return."

"But Kounan *is* in danger." Hikari said stubbornly. "I saw it! And I… I want to help stop it!"

"So what will you do, Suzaku no Shinzahou? Suzaku's power already lives within you, after all."

Hikari swallowed her frustration, sending Chichiri a helpless

glance, and Chichiri spread his hands.

“Taiitsukun, what do you *advise* we do?” He asked softly. “You said before that Kutou are seeking the four treasures. Is that still true?”

“Yes.” Taiitsukun confirmed. “Even now, envoys from the East are making preparations to travel to the Western lands.”

“The Western lands?” Tasuki frowned. “Why there? Isn’t it one hell of a way for them?”

“They no doubt have their reasons.” Taiitsukun pursed her lips. “It would be unwise to let them take it so easily, if you really seek to protect this world. I cannot tell you much about Sairou’s Shinzahou, but you have one great advantage over the travellers from the East. Sairou’s border is within a day’s ride from Reikaku-zan — in contrast, even coming by sea and avoiding potential conflict with people in your land or the North, those from Kutou will not reach the desert West within this week.”

“So we could head off that way now and get there before them?” Tasuki asked. Taiitsukun pursed her lips.

“Sairou no Shinzahou is in the custody of one who wears the Tiger’s mark.” She said softly. “But getting to its location will not be easy. Equally, convincing the Guardian to relinquish it… will be even more difficult to achieve.”

“One of Byakko’s people?” Chichiri looked startled. “Reincarnated?”

“As you say.” Taiitsukun looked thoughtful.

“And there’s no way for us to track it — you can’t give us some clue as to where we should be going?” Tasuki asked.

“In your case, Tasuki, you’re not going anywhere.” Taiitsukun shook her head, and the bandit bristled, anger glittering in his bronze eyes.

“What the hell do you mean by that?”

“Who are you, Genrou of Reikaku-zan? What mark do you have emblazoned on your forearm?” Taiitsukun murmured, and Tasuki’s brows knitted together.

“Suzaku’s, you mad old hag. What does that have to do with anything?”

“Suzaku’s.” Taiitsukun ignored the insult, nodding her head slowly so that her jowls wobbled against her throat. “Quite so.”

“Wait.” Chichiri frowned. “Are you saying… Tasuki and I… can’t go to Sairou?”

“She said *that*?” Tasuki looked blank. “Are you *sure*?”

“But if they can’t… how can we get the Shinzahou?” Hikari looked alarmed. “Taiitsukun, please — will you explain what you mean?”

“You have been playing in far more dangerous waters than you realise.” Taiitsukun said with a sigh. “Listen to me. Chichiri’s family were assaulted by the assassin known as Miramu. He is not a man to be taken lightly. Not only did he succeed in wresting the treasure from you, he also managed to track your movements and beat you to your own home territory. And, as you’ve already surmised, he is in the pay of the Eastern Empire.”

She frowned.

“Kutou’s men will come to Kounan. They must, to achieve their goal.” She added. “Deep within Reikaku-zan is the relic Hisei, Suzaku’s Guardian spirit. And then there is Hikari — the Shinzahou, of whose true form they remain ignorant. Kutou have already raised their mage, with the help of the Shinzahou Miramu stole from you. She is not an enemy to be gainsaid, either. In the circumstances, it seems clear that it was your chi, Chichiri, and that of Tasuki that your enemies were able to follow. For this reason… for you to go West…”

She shook her head.

“There is risk.” She murmured. “If Kutou learn that Kounan’s protectors are not within the Southern Lands.”

“So Kutou are scared of us.” Tasuki snorted. “And they’re such cowards that they’ll only attack when our backs are turned?”

“Don’t underestimate them. Desperation brings its own strength.” Taiitsukun reflected.

“Tasuki and I have to stay in Kounan in case of an attack. That’s what you’re saying.” Chichiri rubbed his temples. “But that doesn’t help in terms of finding the Shinzahou from the other lands, Taiitsukun. We can’t be in two places at once.”

“Hikari will go, of course.”

“But…” Hikari’s eyes widened, then, “*Alone*? Are you *kidding* me?”

“Not alone.” Taiitsukun shook her head. “I’m sure that you will have an admirable armed escort from Reikaku-zan, if you so choose. But Suzaku’s Seishi must stay in Kounan for the time being. Next time

the casualties may be more than one scared little eight year old. Villages, communities — both Tasuki and Chichiri understand the risks of war better than you can, my child."

"So you're sayin' we let Hikari an' Jin an' my cub go off into the West to face God knows what on their own?" Tasuki demanded. "You've finally gone senile!"

"To do so is Hikari's destiny, Tasuki. Your impatience won't change that." Taiitsukun said softly, and Tasuki stared at her.

"You think I'm goin' to let them throw themselves into danger without one of us bein' there to protect them?" He exclaimed. "You have lost your mind! The altitude of this place has finally gotten to you!"

"Your duty is to protect Kounan, Reikaku-zan no Genrou." Taiitsukun told him firmly. "The ones who should defend Hikari are not here to call upon. Your duty to protect her as Suzaku no Shinzahou lies within the Southern lands. You have both already seen the potential cost of leaving Kounan and embarking on trips into the other lands. You are no longer trailing Suzaku no Miko. This is not that legend. And in the absence of other protectors, Hikari has Jin and she has Shishi. They are the only ones who must leave here with her. They are, in the absence of Celestial Warriors, the ones who will be her guardians on this trip."

"Have you any idea what you're saying?!" Tasuki demanded. "What do you mean, the ones who should defend her? The other Suzaku Seishi? But what's wrong with us?! What on earth are you talking about, you mad old bat!?"

"No, I think she's right, you know." Chichiri looked troubled, shaking his head. "Potentially, we know that Hikari is the one who can find the treasure. She found Seiryuu's — and she is growing stronger. And in theory, she is more powerful than I am — in terms of the magic Suzaku sealed inside of her. It should… be all right."

"But I don't know how to use that power!" Hikari protested. "I can't protect myself, let alone anyone else! And what about Jin and Shishi? They don't have any power at all!"

"And yet, this is your destiny." Taiitsukun's expression softened, and she cast the young girl a smile. "Don't look so disheartened. The Guardian of Byakko no Shinzahou is not someone you should fear."

"You just said persuading this Byakko person to relinquish it would be difficult." Tasuki objected. "Now you're saying she shouldn't be

bothered about it? Which is it?"

"Both." Taiitsukun said serenely. "I do not think Toroki will choose to fight — she is not a violent woman by nature."

"She's a *woman*?" Tasuki blinked, and Taiitsukun nodded.

"She is." She agreed serenly. "And one born of a gentle disposition. Convincing her of your need for the treasure — therein lies the true objective. Toroki takes her role as Byakko's Seishi very seriously… Hikari's real challenge lies in negotiation, not in combat."

"Well, I suppose that's a little easier." Hikari frowned. "I mean, if it's not going to mean fighting over it. I don't really… want to fight a Seishi if I can help it. Even a re-born one."

"You already have, my child, and triumphed." Taiitsukun reminded her, and Hikari frowned, shaking her head.

"No…" She murmured. "I didn't really fight Suboshi. I might have talked him down — but it's not the same thing."

Taiitsukun's expression became thoughtful, but she did not make any further comment. Instead she shrugged her shoulders.

"Hikari, this is the true test of your convictions." She said at length. "Your destiny is to travel into Sairou — not just for Kounan's sake, but for the sake of this world. Will you accept that task?"

Hikari swallowed hard, biting on her lip, and for a moment there was silence. Then, slowly, she nodded her head.

"I promised." She said helplessly. "So what else can I do? I can't just not do anything… but… are you sure… I'll be all right?"

"Have faith in yourself a little." Taiitsukun advised. "You have a few days to prepare for your journey. Kutou will not reach Sairou for a week at the earliest, and even then they have more land to cross than you will to reach the Shinzahou's location."

She gestured towards Chichiri, offering him a smile.

"As far as teachers go, I think you could do worse." She added. "Listen well, Hikari, and let Chichiri tell you what he can. You have maybe four days in which to practice and learn as much about your magic as you can, before setting off into the mountains."

Hikari glanced at Chichiri, who slowly nodded his head.

"We'll begin as soon as possible." He agreed gravely. "And see just how much of Suzaku's power we can stir inside of you before the time

comes for you to head into the desert."

"There's nothing else you can tell me?" Hikari glanced at Taiitsukun hopefully, and the aging hermit smiled, looking both sinister and surreal at the same time.

"Beware the one who bears the sign of the net." She murmured.

"Chiriko?" Tasuki blinked. "What the…?"

"Will you be quiet, you foolish bandit?" Taiitsukun eyed him impatiently. "No, not Chiriko. The one who bears the mark of Amefuri… in the desert lands. You will likely encounter him… when you do, beware. Things are not always as they seem — do not take his presence lightly. So long as you heed my warning, all will be well. Do not engage him in conflict… you cannot possibly understand the kind of enmity he is capable of unleashing on those he considers in his way."

"So there are *two* Byakko Seishi in Sairou? Not just one?" Chichiri asked sharply. Taiitsukun nodded.

"Both born as Guardians of the Shinzahou, but Amefuri has denied the Tiger's call." She added gravely. "He will try to make your path difficult, and on this subject you must seek Toroki's help. She is, after all, the only one who understands his true nature and the secret of his power. You and your companions must listen well to her words — take her advice as if it came from me. If you do not… you will regret it. You must make an ally of Toroki if you are to successfully complete your task."

"I better hope she's in a helpful mood, then." Hikari sighed. "Fine. All right. I got it, I think. No more — I might freak out completely if I have to take in any more information."

Chichiri sent her a troubled look, then he held out his hands.

"Grab on." He said softly. "We don't have much time — and I want to ensure you're as prepared as you can be before we let you go anywhere near Sairou's border!"

:::Seiryuu no Teki:::

—Owari —